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勇者の

和ヶ原聡司
イラスト 029

YU-SHA NO SEGARE

セガシ

Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Illustrations

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勇者の セガレ

3 和ヶ原聡司
イラスト 029



Diana
DIANAZE KRONE

Syoko Tatewaki





Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Prologue

Prologue

Seven o'clock in the evening, on a weekday.

The only sound that could be heard in the dining kitchen was the sound of the refrigerator.

On the door of the refrigerator — which was already over ten years old — was a flyer for a pizza delivery store, held in place by a magnet that was yellowed with age and had been a handout from the water supply company.

On the side of the sink was a dish rack with tableware that had just been washed.

There were five sets of tableware, including five sets of chopsticks.

It was easy to see that a family had just finished eating dinner, a perfectly ordinary dining kitchen that could be found anywhere in Japan. However, a grave voice suddenly echoed within that room.

“.....I can't take any more of this.”

That sudden declaration startled everyone else present.

Everyone there had been fearing the day those words would be said. No, maybe they had just been waiting for it instead.

Everyone from the Kenzaki Family knew that those words would eventually be said by the central pillar of their family, Kenzaki Hideo.

“I just think... it's impossible to continue like this.”

“Dad...”

“Dear...”

Kenzaki Hideo's daughter, Kenzaki Nodoka, and his wife, Kenzaki Madoka,

looked at him anxiously.

“Yasuo... you understand why this is necessary as well, right?”

“.....”

The eldest son of the family, Kanzaki Yasuo, could only groan when his father called out to him, and gave no other response.

However, mixed in that groan was a feeling that Yasuo had resigned himself to the fact that there was no other choice.

It was something that would have been impossible for him until just recently.

However, Yasuo was no longer a child who could not see the reality before him or understand his father's feelings.

Compared to the heavy atmosphere around the four members of the Kanzaki family, there was one more person there who was surrounded by an even heavier atmosphere.

She had golden hair that set her apart from the Japanese look, and her green eyes showed a level of exhaustion that she could not hide. She looked like she might vanish at any instant.

Originally, the current state of affairs that were plaguing the Kanzaki family should have been something that she should have welcomed.

However, that girl was not insensitive enough to be able to accept it without any guilt.

In fact, she was the most distressed among all the people here, to an extent that she looked like she wanted to disappear.

Hideo glanced at that golden-haired girl, Dianaze Krone, before finally saying what he was thinking about.

“.....Dear, Nodoka, Yasuo... I.... I....!”

Seeing that the moment was near, Yasuo sat up and tensed his body.

“I will go to the other world, Ante Lande!”

Everyone in that place felt the impact from those words, spoken with a determination like steel.

“I want you to understand... Please understand, I can’t take any more of this.....”

And after those words like steel came that weak-sounding excuse.

Kenzaki Hideo raised his right hand that he had weakly opened, and folded his thumb.

“First the main door... and then, the car.”

At that instant, Diana gave a start and cowered down, and Madoka also slumped her shoulders.

“And then even the bathroom.”

By the time Hideo had folded his middle finger, even Yasuo and Nodoka had no choice but to nod.

“.....I’m so sorry! It was all because of my... because of our carelessness!”

Diana finally became unable to bear it, and started apologizing after bending her head down at the table.

“Yasuo, you understand, right? I am going to Ante Lande! If we leave things as they are, rather than our family, it is our house that will get blown away! Before that happens, I want to go to Ante Lande and get a proper hold of the situation! You understand, don’t you!?”

Just one month ago, Yasuo had rebelled against this statement from his father with all his strength.

However, in the present situation...

Yasuo looked at his father who was gritting his teeth, and at Diana who was bowing so low that she appeared to falling prostrate on the table.

“.....Take care, and come back soon.”

He had no choice but to nod and respond like that.

“I’m glad that you understand.”

His father’s tired words reached Yasuo’s ears.

“One more thing, Yasuo.”

“Eh?”

“About what should be done in the future, regarding Tatewaki-san...”

After hearing the string of words that followed, Yasuo said, “Huh.....?”

After staring blankly with his mouth open for a while, “.....S-Seriously?”

The only thing he could do was fall into a panic.



Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Chapter 1

Chapter 1 – What has to be seen through to the end

On her way back from school, Tatewaki Shouko unconsciously tensed her body when she saw the message that she had received on the ROPE messaging application; or more to the point, when she saw *who* had sent the message.

The message that she had received from Kenzaki Yasuo was very concise.

『Can we meet today?』

“.....Ha? Haah?”

She stopped in her tracks, took a deep breath of air, let it out, and tried her best to calm her heartbeat.

There was nothing to be worried about.

Just when she was about to start walking again, she received another barrage in the form of one more message.

『There’s something I want to talk to you about.』

“Stop sending such suggestive messages.”

Shouko unconsciously said that aloud.

From the way the messages were written, it looked like he wanted to meet her so that he could confess his feelings for her.

She waited for a while longer, but she didn’t receive any further messages or stickers.

Since she was staring at the message screen, the sender should have already seen that the message was marked as read.

It would be bad if she made him wait too long and caused him to send another strange follow-up message.

The sender was that Yasuo, after all. That Kenzaki Yasuo.

Trying to guess the intent behind the message was well and good, but in this case the meaning behind it was definitely going to be something that would exceed her imagination.

“Ugh..... Ugh..... Haa.”

While gritting her teeth, Shouko gathered her resolve and sent a reply.

『Sure, if it is after my classes at prep school today.』

Although Shouko and Yasuo went to different high schools, they lived close by and went to the same prep school.

If they wanted to meet, there would be a number of chances for them to do so, but talking after her classes at prep school would be the most 『natural』.

She received a reply immediately, as if the sender had been waiting for her response.

『I’d rather not be overheard. Can we meet privately?』

“.....”

Shouko looked up from her phone for an instant and her her composure cracked.

She then started operating her slimphone with so much force that the LCD screen was in danger of breaking, and pushed the button for the telephone call. After a few rings, Yasuo picked up.

『Ah, T-Tatewaki-san, sorry about the sudden—』

“Choose your words more carefully!!!”

『Eh!? Did I write something weird? I’m sorry!』

Even ordinarily, Shouko was under a fair amount of stress on a daily basis.

On that day. The day when her relationship with Yasuo had gone through a perceptible change.

When Shouko had returned home, she dove into her bed, pressed her face into her pillow, and continued groaning and screaming into it for about an hour.

Even later, whenever she remembered what had happened, she felt like hitting her head against the wall at home, or against her desk or locker at school. She had actually done that a few times.

At that time, she had done it so casually.

She had told Yasuo how she felt about him.

Even though she had told him, what came after was the absolute worst.

Despite the fact that she had been influenced by the atmosphere, why had she gone and done something so rash?

She must have been delusional. There was no other explanation for it.

Considering what had happened to her recently, becoming delusional might have been unavoidable.

Another mistake she had made was to not ask for a response from him.

However — no, exactly because of that, this was a little cruel.

“Everything about what you sent is weird! What is it!? Did you feel like responding to my confession or something!?”

『Ueeh!? Eh, t-that is...』

“I’m ready to hear your answer anytime!”

『Umm, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that, did I really write something that made you think that?』

“If anything, it felt like you were going to confess your feelings for me instead!”

『Eeeh!?!』

“I know, okay!? It hasn’t been that long since that incident, and seeing as you want to talk to me about something, it must be really important, right? It probably has something to do with Ante Lande, right!? That’s why you didn’t want anyone to overhear and asked to meet in private, right!? Well!?”

『T-That’s right, yes.』

“Then write that to begin with! Don’t get my hopes up!”

『Eh? Hopes!?!』

“That’s right! Do you have any idea how I feel right now? I want to keep my hopes up but I feel like I don’t have any hope, which leaves me just feeling regretful, and in spite of that I’m still holding on to that hope!”

Even Shouko didn’t understand what she was saying anymore, but she didn’t think what she was saying was wrong.

“Well!? Is that something we can’t talk about now!? There’s no one around here right now!”

『W-Well, uh, It’s not that we can’t speak over the phone, but it’s a really serious matter so I’d like to talk about it in person and explain the circumstances.』

Despite the fact that Yasuo’s voice had become completely timid, Shouko did not show any mercy.

“What’s the topic?!?!”

『T-Topic? Umm, let’s see.... How do I put this... There’s this place I want you to go—』

“.....I just told you to choose your words carefully, didn’t I?”

『Eh?』

“You’re definitely not inviting me out on a date or anything, right? You’re talking about Ante Lande, right?”

『Eh!? A date!? Eh!? How did you know I was talking about Ante Lande!?』

“Are you making fun of me!? Fine, be that way!”

Despite the fact that she had confessed her feelings to him, she knew that Kenzaki Yasuo had neither a decisive personality, nor the experience of an adult.

It was apparent at a glance that he was not used to dealing with women, and he was more a child than an adult.

However, because of that, it could be said that he was more earnest and truthful than most other boys of his age.

With his personality, Yasuo would never try and make plans to meet or give his reply to her confession over a messaging application like ROPE.

He would definitely try to go about giving her his reply in a more formal way, and make a mistake somewhere.

That being the case, the only other important matters that Yasuo would want to discuss with her would be college examinations or the other world, Ante Lande.

“Haa, forget it. I don’t get what it’s about, but I’ll see you today after my classes are finished! We can meet up at the lounge at the prep school! Goodbye!!Aaaargh!”

After hanging up without even waiting to hear Yasuo’s reply, Shouko let out a rough breath and unconsciously gripped her Slimphone tightly in her hand, but, “Eh?”

Someone snatched her Slimphone out of her hand all of a sudden, and she quickly raised her head.

At some point, a beautiful young woman with golden hair and emerald-green eyes had appeared beside her, and was looking at Shouko’s face with a complicated expression.

“Be careful. Your eyes.”

The girl just said that short sentence, and Shouko unconsciously put both her hands over her eyes.

“Aaah... Ugh, my hands are so cold....”

While feeling the coldness from her hands over her eyes, she let out a large sigh.

“Umm, I’m sorry for doing that all of a sudden. At that rate, it looked like you were going to crush your Slimphone, so...”

“No... that’s okay. Thank you, Diana-san. I probably would have done that. Haa.”

Shouko pressed down on her eyes for about ten seconds.

By the time she moved her hands away, the ominous black flames that had been flickering around her eyes had vanished. Shouko, who looked a little tired, stared into the empty sky.

Diana, who had been guarding Shouko, could not hide her surprise at seeing Shouko control the flames so easily, even if it was only in the region around her eyes.

“.....That was splendid. It looks like you have it under control now.”

“I wonder if something like this can be called having it under control.”

Although Diana looked impressed, Shouko shook her head.

“It has happened a few times since then. However, since I know the reason why it happened, I was able to learn a trick to calm myself down.”

“Umm... by a trick to calm down, you mean...?”

“It’s embarrassing, so I’d rather not say it aloud. Although it’s pointless to feel shy about it in front of you after all that has happened, Diana-san.”

While saying that, Shouko looked at her Slimphone which Diana had rescued.

The screen still showed the ROPE application with Yasuo’s messages.

Diana immediately realized what Shouko was thinking after following her gaze and looking at the screen.

“Ah, yes. Here you go.”

Diana returned the Slimphone to Shouko with a complicated expression on her face.

Shouko also understood that Diana had realized what she was thinking of, as she accepted the Slimphone and put it into sleep mode in an annoyed manner.

“Thank you. Actually, Yasu-kun was saying some stupid things earlier, so...”

“.....Stupid things.....?”

“Apparently he wants to talk to me about something important.”

“Something important... Ah, so he put it like that?”

“Oh, so you know about it as well, Diana-san. That means it has something to

do with Ante Lande, right?”

“That’s... right. It is definitely...”

“Dammit. Why’d I have to go and...”

Seeing Shouko slump her shoulders in an exaggerated manner, Diana once again showed a complicated expression.

※

The other world, Ante Lande.

Tatewaki Shouko had first found out about that ridiculous concept — or rather, that ridiculous world — only a week ago.

Apparently, the parents of Kenzaki Yasuo, her classmate from middle school whom she had been reunited with at prep school after entering her third year of high school, were a Hero and Sage who had saved that other world from peril around thirty years ago.

Even that sounded ridiculous enough that Shouko did not know how to react, but now that Ante Lande was apparently once again facing an unprecedented crisis, so they sent over an emissary to summon Yasuo’s parents back to that world.

That emissary was Dianaze Krone, a Magitech Knight.

That young woman, who was called Diana, told them about the monsters called 『Shii』 that were eating away at her world, and asked for the Hero to return to her world once more. However, after some dispute among the members of the Kenzaki family, for some reason Yasuo had apparently volunteered to become the new Hero.

All of this had been properly explained to Shouko, but she had only seen a small part of it with her own eyes and hence there were still parts of the story that she did not completely understand.

In fact, the part that was important to Shouko came after that.

The monsters mentioned earlier, the 『Shii』, had appeared in Japan, that is to say in this world. Due to that, Diana’s superior officer, Khalija Welleger, had also been dispatched to help guard the Kenzaki family.

However, while still in Ante Lande, Khalija had become involved with a group of people who could apparently control the Shii, and developed a deep-rooted conviction that it was possible to resurrect people who had died by using the Shii which imitated their appearance.

After a fierce fight, Khalija's ambition was crushed and she was released from her delusion, but at some point between Khalija's appearance in Japan and her fight with the Kenzaki family, Shouko had been possessed by one of those 『Shii』.

That Shii had appeared in the form of a monster in front of Yasuo several times, and apparently used its inhuman strength to hurt Diana and Yasuo.

Shouko did not have any memories of the time when the Shii took over her body.

Annoyingly enough, when Shouko's feelings of love for Yasuo grew too strong to hold in check, the Shii would start to manifest in the form of cold, dark flames that came out of her eyes and would attempt to take over her body.

That was a pretty girly reason for the Shii — which were said to be basically the same sort of existence as the living dead — to appear.

Not only Diana, but even Khalija had no idea how to effectively deal with Shouko's situation, and they had never heard of a similar case occurring in Ante Lande either.

After being placed in this situation, Shouko decided upon the path of 『Confessing her feelings to Yasuo』.

After hearing all the details, Shouko surmised that the Shii would take over her body when her feelings for Yasuo got out of control.

She thought that if she just told Yasuo how she felt, she would be able to prevent her feelings from bursting forth unexpectedly.

Doing that had an effect greater than what Shouko, Diana, and Khalija had expected.

Just like what had happened earlier, if her feelings for Yasuo ever crossed the breaking point, she would be able to repress the black flames by calming her

heart.

Looking at it another way, it could also be said that in the one week since Shouko had told Yasuo how she felt about him, the Shii had become that much more insistent on manifesting.

One of the reasons for that was the fact that even though she had told Yasuo how she felt about him, she had not demanded a reply, which left her in a state of constant worry.

The other reason, and perhaps this was unavoidable, was the fact that Yasuo had been acting evasive whenever they met at prep school.

He would not look her in the eye.

He would run away from her.

Just this was enough to make Shouko indescribably anxious.

It had taken her a considerable amount of courage to tell him how she felt about him.

And what's more, it was under circumstances that could not be explained by common sense.

Despite all she did, since the other person was behaving like that, Shouko's current feelings had bypassed anxiety and it didn't take her very long to think, Maybe my confession has caused Yasuo a lot of trouble.

Perhaps Yasuo was feeling troubled by getting a confession of love from someone he didn't care about at all.

Rather than the crisis in the other world or monsters that she had not seen with her own eyes, Shouko was constantly bothered by such uneasy thoughts that were far closer to her heart and were more concrete.

And then, she had received that ROPE message under such circumstances.

Shouko could hardly be blamed for letting the black flames leak out of her eyes.

※

“.....So, what is it?”

Even before she called out to him, it was readily apparent that Yasuo was very tense.

“H-How about we leave this place first.”

A slightly shrill voice, and a red face.

Looking at him made even Shouko feel embarrassed. Yasuo was just that agitated when looking at Shouko’s face... or so it seemed.

“Take care on your way back.”

Kobayashi, the tutor in charge of them, had stayed back until the last time slot of the lectures to make sure all the students had left, and he saw them off. The two of them headed out into the night air that gave off a slight, but discernible, presence of approaching summer.

“So, where do you want to go?”

“Eh, ah, umm..... It’s pretty late, and I don’t want to take up too much of your time, so how about that Weloce over there?”

Cafe Weloce, located just off Prope Street, was an ordinary outlet of a cafe chain that was not particularly unusual in any way, but unlike the other cafes that closed at nine in the evening, Cafe Weloce was the only shop that stayed open until eleven at night.

At the prep school that Shouko and Yasuo attended for their university exams, 『Senshuu Academy』 in Tokorozawa, students could not stay beyond nine-thirty at night.

Even if they stopped at the shop on their way home at that time, about a quarter of the seats would usually be taken.

During the five minutes it took them to walk to Weloce, Shouko looked at Yasuo’s back as he walked slightly unsteadily, and once again started to imagine what he wanted to talk to her about.

Considering how much Yasuo was wavering as he told her that he wanted to take her somewhere, it didn’t take much imagination to deduce that their destination would be Ante Lande.

However, if that was the case, she couldn’t understand why they had to talk

alone.

Shouko, Yasuo, and Yasuo's younger sister, Kanzaki Nodoka, had guards accompanying them to protect them against threats from Ante Lande, including the Shii.

The guards were Diana, Yasuo's mother, Kanzaki Madoka, and Khalija, who had sworn absolute obedience to the Kanzaki family and Diana after the recent battle.

Diana had been guarding Shouko today, and judging by the way she had spoken, Shouko felt that Diana didn't plan on attending the meeting. However, even that was strange.

As she was thinking about that, she realized that they had already arrived in front of Weloce.

After they took up their positions in seats where the other customers would not be able to overhear them, Yasuo pulled out his wallet and turned to Shouko.

"What would you like, Tatewaki-san? Since I called you out here for my own reasons, I'll pay."

"....."

"Hmm?"

Shouko suddenly felt that her current expression was completely deadpan.

".....I'll have a medium ice tea. I don't need syrup."

"Ah, o-ok, got it."

Yasuo showed a look of relief for just a second after Shouko told him her order, and walked towards the register in high spirits.

On the other hand, Shouko sat down in the aisle seat and leaned back heavily after letting out a sigh.

"『My own reasons』, huh?"

From the way he put it, Shouko was certain that Yasuo's business with her today was not something that would make her jump with joy.

No matter the circumstances, the place that he wanted her to go to was most likely the other world, Ante Lande. The destination would be the Resteria Kingdom, the country that Diana and Khalija were from.

The reason was probably to look into the matter of the 『Shii』 that was hiding inside her body.

“.....”

When she once again looked blankly towards Yasuo, she saw that he was walking slowly towards her while holding a tray with glasses of ice coffee and ice tea on it.

Shouko, who occasionally helped out at the pub that her parents ran, 『Restaurant Saburou』, thought about something pointless like he wouldn't last a second waiting tables with that kind of skill at holding trays.

Yasuo, who somehow managed to reach the table safely, let out his breath and put a glass down in front of Shouko.

“Thank you.”

With this, they were finally ready to start talking, but for some reason Yasuo had beads of sweat on his forehead.

“Just go ahead and drink up. We can talk after we relax a little.”

“Ah, o-okay.”

Yasuo meekly nodded and drank half of the ice coffee in one gulp, without even adding milk or syrup.

Was he just that nervous?

Shouko already had a fair idea of what Yasuo wanted to say to her, and she knew that telling her would be quite stressful for him considering his position, so she did not tell him to hurry up.

If she was in his place and had to tell a friend that got caught up in her own family's affairs that they had to now go to some incomprehensible place, she would definitely be tense and find it hard to say.

“Umm, sorry for calling you out all of a sudden.”

“Forget about that. Let’s just get it done with. What is it?”

“Ah, okay. Well, you already guessed about half of it already, but basically, my father has decided to go to Ante Lande for a few days for reconnaissance, and he wants you to go with him.”

“A few days? Oji-san was Hero, right? Is he going to settle everything in just a few days?”

“That might be asking for a little too much, but he was saying that he wanted to get some firsthand information, as well as seriously negotiate with Diana’s mother and the Resteria Kingdom. To put it frankly, he wants to tell them not to be stingy with the guard detail.”

“That’s true. If you think about it, Khalija-san is the person who tried to kidnap me, and yet she’s now guarding me, you, and Nodoka-chan. I guess that’s pretty strange.”

“Right. And then there’s the matter of yourself, Tatewaki-san. Although we as a family feel very sorry about it, in a way you are the first victim caused by Ante Lande’s actions in Japan. Dad said that another reason why he wanted to go was to make sure that they take responsibility for that. Of course, he wants you to accompany him for that as well.”

“I see. I’ll be going to Ante Lande so that they can research more about that 『Shii』, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. Of course, Diana will go along as well, or maybe I should say that she will be returning home along with you.”

Up to this point, the discussion made sense.

Of course Shouko didn’t want that ominous existence hanging around her, and if they could research it and remove it from her, that would be great.

However, in the conversation so far, the name of the person who was important to Shouko didn’t come up even once.

“What about you, Yasu-kun? Aren’t you going too?”

“.....For now, I am not included in the plan.”

“Why not!?”

Yasuo, surprised by Shouko's unexpected outburst, spoke hurriedly.

"I'd love to go as well, but it looks like it costs a lot of money to go to Ante Lande."

The pathway that connects the other world, Ante Lande, to Japan was called a 『Gate Tower』.

It appeared to be an extraordinarily large-scale sorcery system, as it would take three percent of the national budget to move a mass equivalent to that of an average adult male.

"But it's not like your family is going to pay for that, right Yasu-kun?"

"Even I'm not sure how large a sum it is or who exactly will bear the burden on Resteria's side, but they will be paying for the entire expense of the trip this time. Diana's share is a given, but just the amount required for my Dad and you will apparently take a large chunk out of their budget."

"If that's the explanation from their side, that's pretty awful of them, don't you think? In the first place, they are the ones who allowed the Shii to come over here, and they are the ones looking to your father for help. Moreover, they even made you start training. They should at least pay the travel fee without grumbling."

Yasuo smiled wryly after hearing Shouko speak.

"Well, nobody came over to arrest Khalija-san, even though she ignored the king's orders and committed a crime here. Besides, between you and me, Tatewaki-san, it should be obvious who needs to go to Ante Lande more, right?"

"So you're saying I'm an ultra-rare sample for experimentation who is more important than the Son of a Hero who is known in every corner of the world?"

"That's a pretty harsh way to put it."

"I mean, that's how the people on that side will see me, after all."

"Well, that may be true... Still, you seem pretty calm about this, Tatewaki-san."

"That's because I don't have any hard facts. Although I would be scared if I found out after going there that they were going to cut my body open without

using anesthesia.”

“Dad and Diana are going to accompany you, so they’ll make sure you don’t come to any harm.”

“Well, I suppose they won’t do anything that might upset the Hero of Salvation.”

Even Shouko was aware of something like that.

“I’ve heard that once you get there, Diana’s mother will be taking care of everything you need. It looks like the incident with Khalija-san has made them very sensitive, so they will be guarding you quite rigorously.”

“And what about Khalija-san?”

“Of course, she’ll be staying behind to take care of things here. Like I said earlier, if she goes over to the other side, she’ll be arrested. It might be fine if it was just that, but in the worst case there is also a danger of her being assassinated, so Diana’s mother has decided that it would be better for her not to return.”

“.....Okay, now I’m feeling a little scared.”

To begin with, Khalija had come to guard the Kenzaki Family on the orders of the King of Resteria, just like Diana. However, she had also come to an understanding with a certain person who appeared to be capable of freely controlling the Shii, and betrayed the Kenzaki family once already in order to help further that person’s goals.

Beatrice Heller, the leader of an organization called 『Carnelian of the Coal Mine』 that took care of refugees.

That was the name of the person who could control the Shii, according to Khalija.

The Carnelian of the Coal Mine was an organization that mainly concerned itself with taking care of the citizens of the Grand Duchy of Torjesso, who were chased out of their homeland thirty years ago by the armies of the Demon King Kaul.

The plan to move them back to their country that was destroyed by Demon

King Kaul was still not complete, and that organization apparently used its influence not only in Resteria, but all over the world in order to help the refugees.

No matter how one looked at it, it appeared to be a splendid charitable organization, so why were they controlling Shii which have the appearance of dead creatures? Moreover, just how much influence does that person called Beatrice Heller have over the organization? There was no way to answer these questions.

However, judging by the fact that Khalija, who was one of Resteria's central military officers, fell under her evil influence, it was obvious that the power of the person who could control the Shii was far more widespread in their world than initially apparent.

Khalija had said that Beatrice Heller was looking for a 『Latch』.

Even Khalija did not know what kind of powers the 『Latch』 possessed, or perhaps would be given, but it appeared that requirement to become one was to be 『A living person who harbors the undead within their body』.

And so, Shouko, who harbored a Shii — an undead creature — within her body was the only 『Latch』 candidate discovered so far.

“Everything about this is so incomprehensible. I suppose this means that in the end, we don't know anything about the matter.”

“I'm really sorry. Even though I was the one who explained it to you, I don't understand most of it myself. However, that makes it all the more important that we make a move while we are still able to, which brings us to this discussion today.”

“Well, I guess you're right. With things as they are, I can't concentrate on my exams either.”

“B-By the way, Tatewaki-san.”

“Hmm?”

Yasuo appeared to have finished his ice coffee in the middle of the conversation.

He once again started sweating strangely.

“The discussion about you going to Ante Lande was of course important, but there’s something more important that I need to tell you, Tatewaki-san.”

“Ah, I see... Eh?”

Shouko, who was about to go along with the conversation as if it was normal, suddenly did a double take.

“Something... that you have to tell me?”

“Yes... This is something we need to discuss before you go to Ante Lande, no matter what.”

“Eh, w-what is...”

Looking at Yasuo’s eyes that seemed to tell her that he had resolved himself, Shouko unconsciously corrected her lax posture.

She straightened her back, put her knees together.

“Well, about what happened earlier, I thought that we should make it official.”

“O-Official.....? Uh, h-hang on a second...”

Although they had been having a completely unromantic conversation about the other world until a moment ago, Yasuo’s behaviour suddenly changed which caused Shouko’s heartbeat to gradually speed up.

“If it’s not too much of a bother... Yeah, as I thought this is a protocol that has to be followed. Tatewaki-san.”

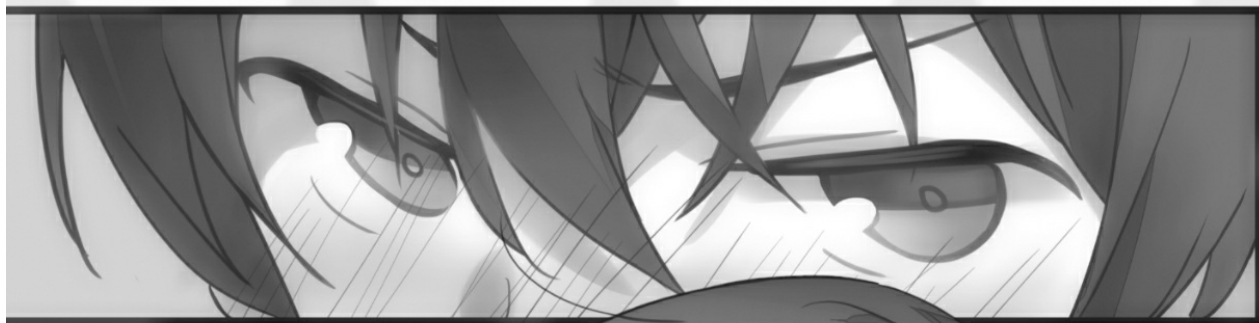
“Y-Yes.”

Even though she was supposed to be tired out from the classes at prep school, her blood ran quickly through her entire body, and even her eyes were widened as we waited to hear what Yasuo would say.

“Tatewaki-san... Would it be okay if I went to greet your parents some time?”

The moment those words fell upon her ears, Shouko’s brain overheated.

“.....Wha—!?”



What came from her mouth was not a word, but merely a sound.

It could be said that Yasuo's request came so far out of left field that the language processing center of her brain refused to work properly.

It was just a reflex action.

"I guess... that it's not okay, after all?"

Yasuo himself had a bright red face, as if he had been thinking too hard about this.

".....It's..... It's not like it's n-not okay, but....."

It was such a sudden attack.

Shouko, who felt like she had received a bodily blow to her blindspot from ultra-long range, could only wait while her thought process began to spin around in circles uselessly.

".....About what happened earlier.... You're talking about that, right?"

"T-That's right. What else is there?"

"T-That's right, but..... I'm sorry, I didn't imagine that something like this would happen, I mean, Yasu-kun, don't you think it's a little too early?"

"I don't think it's too early. If anything, this is the proper procedure to see things through."

"I-Is that so? Is that how it works!?"

"That's how it works. This is something that will affect the rest of your life, but we are both still students right now, so we can't really go ahead without your parents' permission....."

"A-Ah, but... Eh, the rest of my life? Y-Yasu-kun, what's up with you? This isn't like you at all."

"Eh? What isn't?"

"I-I mean....."

Although he had seemed so hesitant in the beginning, once the words had left

his mouth, his strong will and sincerity strongly shone through.

Shouko's face had turned so red that there was no way to hide it.

Was this a dream?

Had she perhaps dozed off in the middle of her lecture, and started dreaming about Yasuo because she was frustrated about not getting an answer from him about 『what happened earlier』?

“Yasu-kun, about that, where were you planning on meeting...?”

“If possible, I would like to visit them at your house... but since it's an important conversation, it might be better to go on a day when your parents are not working.”

“Y-You're... That serious...”

“Yes. I think it'll take time to get them to understand. Still, I'll explain it to them properly.”

“I-I understand. Umm, t-thank you...”

Hearing Shouko talk as if she was delirious from a high fever, Yasuo shook his head.

“You don't need to thank me. If anything, I should be thanking you for agreeing.”

“O-Of course I would agree! I-I mean... I didn't think that you would take this so seriously, Yasu-kun...”

“Of course. I don't know if your parents will believe me, but my Dad, my Mom, and Diana will come along as well and we will try our best to convince them.”

“I..... Huh?”

Shouko felt like a crack had developed in her vision, and the north and south poles of the planet had suddenly been reversed.

“.....Your Dad, your Mom, and Diana-san too? They're coming? To my house?”

“Eh? Well, that's obvious.”

“.....Why?”

“What do you mean, why... If they don’t, there’s no way your parents will believe me.”

“.....Believe what?”

“T-Tatewaki-san, what’s wrong? Are you okay? I mean, it’s obvious.....”

Yasuo started to panic when he saw that Shouko was acting strangely, but Shouko just felt like the world was rapidly losing color and the temperature was dropping.

“If you go to Ante Lande, you won’t be able to return on the same day. Due to limitations of the Gate Tower, I’ve heard that it is better to keep about five full days open for the trip. However Golden Week is already over and there are no more consecutive holidays coming up soon, so if you have to go to Ante Lande there’s no choice but to take time off from school. Moreover you have exams this year so we can’t really take you away for one week without explaining the reason to your parents. So we all sat down and thought about it, but in the end we decided that we would need to tell your parents about the circumstances in Ante Lande as well.”

“.....Oh, I see.”

“I know that the whole thing is pretty incomprehensible, and I don’t know if your parents will believe me, but trust me when I say that I don’t have any intention of deceiving your parents. I will sincerely explain everything to them.”

Now it all made sense.

In that case, they would have to come on a day when her parents were not working, Yasuo would also 『seriously』 talk about 『what happened earlier』, namely the incident that Shouko was involved in, and if the Kenzaki couple and Diana were not present, the discussion could not even start.

Now it all made sense.

Shouko felt like all the strength was leaving her body, and unable to recover, she felt like she might slide and fall out of her chair.

“Tatewaki-san!?”

“.....It must be nice to be an adult!”

“Eh?”

“I guess this is the kind of situation where they would drown their sorrows in alcohol!”

“What are you talking about!?”

Yasuo panicked as Shouko’s voice got progressively more hoarse, but of course Yasuo didn’t stop to think for a second that he had something to do with it.

“Yasu-kun.”

“Yes?”

“Come here for a bit.”

While still looking like she was about to fall off her chair, she beckoned towards Yasuo with her hand.

After Yasuo obediently stood up and came to stand next to her, Shouko looked at him with a feeble glare and then, “Sei!” She drove her fist into his side with a fair amount of power.

“Guaaah!? What the heck!?”

Yasuo groaned at Shouko’s sudden violence, but Shouko just gazed blankly ahead.

“.....That’s my line... I feel like I’m going to turn in a Shii any minute.....”

“E-Eh!? Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m not...”

“Hey!!”

As Shouko moaned indistinctly, faint black flames started to rise up from her eyes and Yasuo started to panic for real.

If Shouko were to turn into a Shii in the middle of the city like this, there was no way for Yasuo to handle it.

“Ah.”

However, Shouko seemed to realize something all of a sudden, as she straightened her body and started looking around restlessly.

And then, when she found what she was looking for, her expression relaxed slightly, and then she glared at Yasuo once more.

“I suppose our discussion is done for now?”

“Eh? Y-Yeah.”

“For now, this is my answer.”

“Answer?”

“Yeah. I didn’t say anything about agreeing to go to Ante Lande yet, after all.”

“Aah... Eh? N-No, that won’t do at all, deciding not to go will make things more difficult for you as well, Tatewaki-san....”

“Yes, I know. But deciding to agree to everything unilaterally doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Well, I can see where you’re coming from...”

Seeing Yasuo look confused, Shouko smiled at him cynically, as if she had regained some of her energy.

The flames in her eyes had disappeared at some point, and her teasing gaze now looked straight at Yasuo.

“So let me just put one condition forward.”

Shouko made a clear declaration.

“Yasu-kun, you have to come along as well. As long as that condition is accepted, I will go to Ante Lande.”

“Eh!?”

Yasuo was just a messenger, and he had no authority to decide anything regarding the trip to Ante Lande.

However, Shouko spoke in a tone that precluded his answer and cut off his confusion.

“I told you the condition for my Shii’s activation along with 『that other thing』,

right? If I'm separated from you for a long time and placed in an unfamiliar environment, who knows what might happen~"

"Ah..."

When Shouko's feelings of love for Yasuo grew beyond her control, the Shii would show itself and take over her body.

Yasuo had certainly heard about that already.

When she brought that up, Yasuo, who could not even call Shouko by her first name, turned bright red and became unable to speak.

"Well then, convey my regards to your father and Diana-san. I'm going home. Ah, you don't need to walk me back."

"Ah, ok, I understand. Umm..."

"I'll contact you again later. See you. Ei."

"Ouch! Eh? Ehh!?"

Shouko, who quickly got ready to leave and stood up, hit the top of Yasuo's head with a karate chop as a parting gift and left the cafe right away.

Yasuo, who was just blankly gazing as she left, suddenly noticed the presence of someone beside him and turned towards them.

"Oh, Diana?"

Diana was sitting in the chair that Shouko had occupied until recently, with an expression that was equal parts embarrassment and exasperation.

"Wait, were you in the shop the whole time?"

"Well, yes. I switched with the Colonel for Shouko's guard duty."

Since it was a public store, it was not that strange that she had decided to come inside to carry out her duty as a guard.

"So you heard what we talked about right... tell me honestly, what do you think? She said she won't go to Ante Lande unless I go along, but I think that's pretty impossible... Diana?"

Yasuo had wanted to discuss the condition that Shouko had brought up, but

he suddenly realized that Diana was actually giving him a reproachful glare for once and he stopped talking in the middle of his sentence.

“Yasuo. I am aware that it is not my place to interfere and say something like this, but what you did earlier was bad. It was horrible.”

“Eh.”

“I think that you should look for an opportunity and properly apologize to Shouko.”

“E-Ehh!?”

“I understand that you didn’t do it out of malice, but there are cases when something is bad precisely because there was no malicious intent. Especially when you are dealing with Shouko. If Nodoka had been here, I’m sure that she would have barged into your conversation at least three times.”

This might be the first time that Diana had reproached him so frankly.

Yasuo, who realized that, finally started to think that he might have done something unforgivable.

“D-Did I really say something that would upset Tatewaki-san to that extent!?”

“Yasuo. Sit down.”

Diana, while frowning and appearing reluctant, made Yasuo sit down in his seat.

Yasuo also felt some sort of disquieting pressure from Diana, and straightened his back unconsciously.

“I don’t particularly think anything about it. But the Colonel probably found it amusing. Just so you know, she heard everything as well.”

“Ugh.”

Seeing Diana’s reluctant face and hearing Khalija’s name come up, Yasuo started to realize that he might have made a fairly large mistake.

“As for the condition Shouko brought up, we will consider that from our side so you needn’t worry about it, Yasuo. More importantly, let me explain to you how cruelly you acted towards Shouko so that you will be able to somewhat

withstand the attacks from the Colonel after you go back home.”

“What do you mean, acted cruelly....”

For Diana who usually saw everything he did in a positive light to say something like that, just how big a mistake had he made?

For the next few minutes, Diana explained in detail just what Yasuo had done, and after that Yasuo put his head down on the table and was not able to get up for a while.

※

“Welcome home, Colonel. That took a while.”

It was quite late at night by the time Khalija returned to Room 101 of Marigold Hills Tokorozawa, the apartment where Diana was staying and was a thirty second walk away from the Kenzaki house.

“Ah, there was just a bit of trouble with Shouko.”

“Did something happen?”

“Because of what a certain idiot did, I wasn’t able to come back home for quite a while. It took a lot of effort to bring her flames back under control.”

“Ahh... Thank you for your hard work.”

After showing a wry smile, Diana took Khalija’s cup out of the kitchen cabinet.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“If we have any ice coffee, I’d like some. I actually worked for once after a long time, so I’m tired.”

Putting it as “work” was quite strange, and for Khalija to actually make a request for something was also quite rare.

Ever since their battle that took place a few days ago, Khalija had not broken her stance of absolute obedience towards the Kenzaki family, and even towards Diana.

On top of being injured, Khalija was aware that she was dependent on Diana for most of her living needs, so that last command she had given to Diana as a superior officer was, 『Don’t take my needs into consideration. Feel free to kill

me at any time if you think I'm acting suspiciously.』

Since she said that, Diana could understand just how much Khalija regretted her actions.

Until now, whenever Diana had asked her what she wanted to eat or drink after she finished her shift at guarding Yasuo, Nodoka, or Shouko, Khalija would only ask for bread or water. That's why, hearing Khalija ask for something else actually made Diana happy.

“Would you like milk and sugar?”

“No, I don't need any. I'm just so thirsty... Ahh, thank you.”

Khalija drank the ice coffee which had no milk or sugar in one gulp and then sighed in contentment even while looking like it gave her a headache.

“.....Still, what did you think of that?”

“Are you talking about Yasuo?”

“He's eighteen years old, right? If this was Resteria, it wouldn't be strange if he was running a household of his own at that age.”

“I suppose it's just a matter of the differences in culture.”

“You think so? While walking around the city, I've seen students who looked younger than Yasuo getting along well with members of the opposite sex.”

“Yasuo has not yet reached that level of maturity when it comes to dealing with the opposite sex.”

“Shouko was saying something similar as well, but that's only if you look at it positively. If you consider it from a neutral standpoint, he just lacks consideration. There are too many problems with his ability to deal with others.”

It was really quite rare for Khalija to be this talkative.

However, Diana had already objected to Yasuo's behavior as a female who happened to be present when Shouko confessed her feelings to him, so she did not refute Khalija's viewpoint.

“I properly explained everything to him, so please don't tease him too much.”

“Major Krone, you’re too soft on him. For a weakling like Yasuo, someone strict like Nodoka would be just about right. If not, he’ll just start depending on you, in a bad way.”

“A bad way?”

“Yes. Can I have another cup?”

“Here you go.”

After getting a refill of iced coffee, Khalija made a grim expression.

“Major Krone, you see Yasuo’s various actions too positively. It is still fine right now, but if he gets into the habit of thinking that you will affirm his worthless behavior every time he encounters trouble, at some point in the future he will just come to a standstill when he encounters an obstacle.”

Diana understood what Khalija was saying.

However, in Diana’s eyes, Yasuo was definitely not that kind of person.

He was just an ordinary person living in this country called Japan.

Saying that he was ordinary meant that he was properly living his life.

“Yasuo isn’t that weak. He may spend more time lost in doubt than most people, but he is still moving forward.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“That coffee isn’t supposed to have any sugar in it, though.”

“You’re doing that on purpose, right? Do you consider him to be nothing more than a troublesome younger brother?”

“Sure, Yasuo is not strong, but he’s not weak either. I don’t think that there are many high school students in this country who can heal themselves and make a plan to defeat you after having a hole opened up in their side.”

“.....Well, sure.”

Once Diana brought that up, Khalija, who herself had lost to that, felt weak instead.

“From my perspective, Yasuo is... that’s right, he is hope.”

“Hope? That guy?”

“Yes.”

Khalija did not know about it.

She did not know how fiercely Yasuo had fought to deny the existence of Diana and Ante Lande.

The instant when his denial turned to acceptance.

The effort he put in to change everything about himself that he had accumulated over the past eighteen years.

“Even Hideo did not start off as the strongest Hero. Moreover, there is no need for Yasuo to become the kind of Hero that Hideo was. That’s why someone like me is only fit for...”

Moreover, Khalija did not know how many obstacles he had overcome, both big and small.

“...supporting the Hero who just began his journey and affirming his every action, don’t you think?”

“.....Fine, do as you like.”

Khalija’s expression looked like she was both exasperated and impressed by what Diana had said. She took a sip of her coffee and mentally added a warning to Diana.

Don’t ever say something like that in front of Shouko.

“Although that might be amusing as well.”

“What are you talking about?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

※

Three days later, on a Saturday.

There was a group of strangely nervous people standing in front of the pub for the masses, 『Restaurant Saburou』.

“.....I say, Dear.”

“What?”

“I feel more nervous than I did before the fight with Kaul.”

“You’re right.”

The Kenzaki couple, Hideo and Madoka.

The Hero of Salvation and the Great Sage were both pale faced and drenched in a cold sweat.

The suit Hideo was wearing wasn’t the one he usually wore to work; it was an expensive tailored-to-order suit that he only wore for very important job meetings.

The suit his mother was wearing was not tailored-to-order, but it was brand new and she had purchased it particularly for this meeting.

Yasuo was naturally wearing his school uniform.

So far it was not particularly strange for a group of people who were visiting another person’s house, but beside them was Diana, dressed in her full dress uniform as a Magitech Knight, which immediately caused their motive to become unclear.

“I-It’s okay. In the worst case, I will take care of it...”

In this situation, Yasuo, who was standing next to Diana while her thought process was stalled, had no idea what was counted as the worst case scenario or what Diana intended to do, but since the previous day he had been so tense that he had not even been able to eat anything.

He had no idea that it would be this frightening to “just” tell strangers who knew nothing about the situation about their absurd secret.

Ever since he had entered middle school, Yasuo had wondered countless times why protagonists from manga, anime, and movies who possessed some special ability or came in contact with other worlds disliked telling other people about their secret.

Considering the commonly used 『Fewer people that know my secret, the better』theory, it made no difference whether the people close to the protagonists knew their secret or not; there was no telling how the enemies

would make use of them in either case.

As for the 『I don't want to get them involved』 theory, it was often the enemies, and not the protagonists who got people involved.

It was usually such protagonists who had a tendency to disappear without saying a word to the people close to them, so in most cases those people would appear at the critical moment purely because they were worried, or act strangely and get noticed by the enemy, and in either case they would get involved in a lot of trouble.

That being the case, Yasuo had always thought that it would be better for the protagonists to take some effort to get those important people to understand their special natures, properly explain the difference in fighting ability and give them an idea about what might happen in the future, and then convince them with a logical argument as to why they should keep their distance.

However, Yasuo finally understood their reluctance, now that he was placed in the same situation.

He understood it precisely because he had felt that way earlier.

What would happen if they revealed their special circumstances, far removed from common sense, to strangers?

It might spell an end to their own 『social life』.

In other words, people from their community in the surroundings they were raised in might say things like, 『That person is a little strange, it might be better to not get involved』, and keep their distance.

Given a choice, he would prefer to be able to go back to his original peaceful life after getting rid of the danger that threatened the world.

What would happen if they put their lives on the line and defeated the powerful enemy to protect the peaceful world they lived in, only to come back to find people saying things like:

『Did you hear about Kenzaki-san's husband? I heard he tried to take the daughter of the couple who run Saburou away by telling them some nonsense about other worlds and demon kings.』

『Oh my... I wonder if he had some problem at his job or something.』

『Both their children have important exams this year, I wonder if the family had a falling-out of some kind.』

『What should we do? By rotation, the next chairman of the regional committee will be Kenzaki-san's husband...』

『How about we say at the next regional event that kids are easily influenced, so someone who talks about “demon kings” is not suitable?』

『Lately there have been a lot of things breaking at the Kenzaki family house... I wonder if those are really accidents... You know, we often hear of incidents caused by people who become unable to tell the difference between reality and fiction.』

『I wonder if they're alright... I wonder if we should consult with the head of the neighborhood association or the district welfare officer... this is so scary.』

If things turned out like that, their only options would be for the whole family to quietly run away to some other place in the dead of the night, or move to the other world and settle down in a place where nobody knew them.

Even Yasuo had not been able to easily accept the reality, even after seeing his father's holy sword and his mother's magic.

Even if Hideo, Madoka, or Diana floated in the air or used magic in front of other people, such things were already a part of the common sense of people living in Japan, and people would forcefully come up with their own explanations for it and things would stagnate there. Such an outcome was also definitely possible.

In the end, he had only believed the story about his parents' past or about the existence of Ante Lande after experiencing the fights with Alexei's Shii and William Bareig.

Even Shouko had only believed it because of the fact that she herself had transformed into a Shii, and also because she encountered the other members of the Kenzaki family, Diana, and Khalija under extraordinary circumstances.

That's why, showing up during a peaceful time and talking to Shouko's

parents about things like 『The other world, Ante Lande』 or 『The Holy Sword, Liutberga』 was a daunting task.

Firstly, Shouko's parents were probably not that different in age from Yasuo's parents.

In which case, they would not be less than forty years old. It was still considered within the prime of one's working life.

Yasuo imagined the appearance of Shouko's father, whom he had not seen yet.

The owner of Restaurant Saburou.

He imagined a burly man who dealt with drunk people on a daily basis, and could resolve any problems that arose with just one hand.

A person with a solidly built physique and a taciturn personality which showed on his face, with a headband tied around his forehead and wearing a black t-shirt and an apron with the restaurant's name printed on it.

Judging by Shouko's skill at cooking and what he had heard from the neighborhood rumor mill, he could imagine that they were a family who communicated well with each other.

And Yasuo's father was going to go into such a place and start the conversation with a sentence like, 『Actually, I was a Hero in another world thirty years ago.』

““I want to go home.””

Just thinking about it made Yasuo's palpitations increase all of a sudden, and he felt the scant contents of his stomach start to rise. Behind him, the Hero of Salvation wholeheartedly agreed with his words.

““.....””

Perhaps seeing how similar the father and son were served to actually strengthen Madoka's determination instead.

Madoka stepped up to the door and pressed the intercom button.

““Ah.....””

The two men let out a wordless scream, but Madoka no longer paid attention to them.

The Tatewaki family house was integrated into the same building as the restaurant Saburou, and actually had a different entrance from the entrance to the restaurant.

However they would have to walk quite some distance through the alley to reach it, and since the restaurant entrance was normally used as the main door by the Tatewaki family as well, Shouko had told them to use the restaurant entrance when they came over.

After a short while, 『I'll be right there!』

He heard a male voice that was far lighter than what he imagined.

“Hello... my name is Kenzaki. We are here to talk to you today about Shouko-san...”

It appeared that Madoka's ability to speak clearly was affected by her stress, but, 『Ah, Kenzaki-san. Please wait a moment.』

The reply was once again far lighter than imagined.

After the call over the intercom ended, Yasuo felt that the following ten-odd seconds stretched on for a horribly long time.

“Hello, welcome. Sorry for having you come all this way.”

The person who appeared from behind the sliding door was very different to the image of the owner of a pub that Yasuo had imagined.

He had a slight build and a handsome face, and he was wearing silver-rimmed glasses. He had a smart air about him.

He was wearing a fresh-looking polo shirt and chino pants, and looked more like a salaryman on his day off than anything else. Was this person really Shouko's father?

“My wife was supposed to join us, but she had some unavoidable personal business to take care of, so I will convey what we discuss to her.”

He had a very gentle expression, and even when he saw the Kenzaki family

dressed formally, or Diana who was dressed in an obviously strange fashion, he didn't change his expression at all.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet us on a holiday. I am Kanzaki Hideo."

Now that things had reached this stage, there was no way that Hideo could stay hidden behind his wife.

He took one step forward and, prior to mentioning his business for the day, he gave a precise bow, and Madoka and Yasuo also bowed upon seeing that.

"It's nice to meet you. I am Shouko's father, Tatewaki Kousuke. Everyone, you don't need to stand on ceremony, please raise your heads."

"No, we can't do that."

"Haa..."

"I believe that your daughter must have already told you about the situation to some extent, but since the matter is quite removed from what would be considered within the realm of common sense, I assume that you must be quite confused. Everything that happened is our responsibility....."

"Kanzaki-san. And the rest of you as well, please calm down. For starters, please come inside."

Shouko's father, Kousuke, invited the group into the shop without any hint of harshness in his attitude.

"Thank you for inviting us in."

Hideo finally raised his head, bowed once more, and proceeded to enter the store. Yasuo and the others followed him inside.

"Welcome. Please take a seat over here."

Kousuke welcomed them in and seated them as if they were regular customers, but the Kanzaki family could not rid themselves of their nervousness.

They could not allow themselves to think that they were welcome here.

It was likely that Kousuke didn't understand the situation at all.

As if to prove that, there was only a slight amount of trepidation mixed into

his gentle tone.

Despite the fact that they had obviously come to apologize as a family for having caused a problem, the reason why Kousuke had invited them in with just that much amount of trepidation was probably because of his etiquette as a member of society.

And then, the first person to crumble under the stress of the situation was Diana.

“I am so sorry for what happened!!”

“Eh!?”

Diana, unable to sit in the chair she had been offered, kneeled down right there on the floor of the restaurant and prostrated herself in front of Kousuke.

“H-Hey, what’s wrong!?”

“I am so sorry for doing something so unforgivable to your daughter during a period of time that is very important to her!”

“U-Umm...”

Kousuke looked bewildered by Diana’s sudden prostration, while on the other hand Yasuo once again felt like running away, but for a different reason from before.

Diana’s apology was certainly not wrong, but seen in the light of Japan’s typical social etiquette, the current situation and Diana’s wording might be seen as an apology for Yasuo having committed some sort of immoral mistake with Shouko.

“You are Diana-san, right? I assumed that you were the one the instant I saw you.”

Putting Yasuo’s unscrupulous imaginations aside, Kousuke spoke to Diana in an unexpectedly gentle tone.

“It looks like your Japanese is quite fluent as well. I’m sorry to say this in the middle of such a tense situation, but I seriously felt like laughing just now.”

“.....Haa.”

Seeing that Diana was not even able to lift her face, Kousuke knelt down and lifted her face up.

“I mean, from the way you put it and the current situation, it sounded like there some serious mistake that happened between Yasuo-kun and Shouko.”

““Eh.....?””

Diana made a sound because she didn’t understand what he meant, and as for Yasuo it was because he hadn’t expected to hear that.

“.....Seriously, I feel like you’re doing this on purpose just to embarrass me.”

They heard a voice from the side.

Looking over to that side, they saw Shouko wearing a triangular head covering and an apron, standing there with a red face.

She was holding a silver-colored ladle in her hand, and Yasuo, whose senses had been dulled due to nervousness, suddenly smelled the aroma of broth that stimulated his appetite.

“I’ve heard about the general situation from my daughter already. Sure, I had trouble believing it in the beginning, but I’m not so hard headed as to not believe something that I saw with my own eyes. Come now, everyone sit down. Ever since she heard that all of you would be coming over, Shouko has been unusually eager in many ways.”

“.....Haa.....”

Yasuo, Hideo, Madoka, and Diana were confused, but sat down at a table for four after hearing Kousuke speak.

“What were the appetizers again, stewed radish?”

“That’s right.”

“.....!”

Diana, who was teary-eyed, suddenly shook when she heard the word “radish.”

“Shouko said that she wanted to invite you all to sample her cooking. She said that Diana-san really enjoyed the lunch she made for the picnic last time, so I

thought that I'd let all of you judge whether she is ready to cook for our customers."

"I-I see."

"That's right. If even a person from another world found it delicious, there should be no problem with serving her food to our customers here."

Hearing Kousuke casually use the phrase 『another world』, Hideo could not hold himself back from speaking.

"Umm, Tatewaki-san, this might be rude of me, but..."

"There are some things that I believe, and some things that I don't."

Kousuke answered Hideo's unspoken question without changing his gentle expression.

"After hearing Shouko's explanation, I came to believe that 『Magic』 exists, and that Shouko has been possessed by some strange being. However, I do not believe in the existence of this other world called 『Ante Lande』 "

"W-Why not?"

Yasuo spoke up for the first time since they had gotten here.

Now that he thought about it, he had not even properly introduced himself, but Kousuke replied like he didn't particularly mind.

"I didn't hear a logical explanation for its existence. And also, because I haven't seen it."

"Because you didn't see it... Eh, hang on!"

Yasuo was not the only one surprised by the implication behind what Kousuke had said.

He would believe it when he saw it.

In that case, just where had Kousuke seen the use of magic?

"Ah, about that, I requested Khalija-san to show it to him the other day."

"Eh!? The Colonel!?"

Hearing Shouko's explanation from the kitchen, Diana was surprised.

Under what circumstances had Khalija come into contact with Shouko's parents?

"Khalija-san escorted me home after my lectures the other day, right? That's when I asked her."

"Ah....."

Speaking of which, Khalija had returned home unusually late that day.

"I mean, I had a really hard time holding back the Shii that day, so I decided that it might be a good time for Khalija-san and I to give my parents a brief explanation."

"Ugh....."

Shouko's verbal arrow struck Yasuo's heart directly.

On that day, after Diana explained what he had said to Shouko, he had spent the night writhing in agony on his bed.

"In the beginning, I wondered why on earth you were wearing sunglasses like that."

Shouko's Shii would manifest from her eyes.

If she managed to hold the flames back to just her eyes, then it was certainly possible to hide that by wearing sunglasses.

"What did the Colonel... What did Khalija Welleger say to you?"

"I had her show pretty much all the magic she was capable of. Earth, water, fire, and wind were a given, and lightning as well. But the most amazing of all was probably that one, the portable stove."

""""Portable stove?""""

Since the topic had suddenly changed from the attributes of magic to a portable stove, all members of the Kenzaki family asked that in unison and tilted their heads.

"That's right. I thought that the fire and lightning were a trick of some sort and I was still not sure if I should believe her, but there was no way I could explain the portable stove."

Saying that, Kousuke stood up and went to a shelf in the corner of the store, picked up two portable stoves, and brought them over to the table where the Kenzaki family were sitting.

“We use these to keep dishes like stew or boiled tofu warm at the table when we serve them, but these two were broken and Khalija-san fixed them.”

Kousuke pumped the gas and twisted the knob on one of the stoves lightly, turning it on and off to show that it was working.

“She just used some copper and metal wire that we had at home. To be honest, that was more surprising than any other magic that she showed that day. The stoves came apart by themselves even though she didn’t even touch them, and the components floated on a slab of light. And then she added in the copper wire and pieces of metal... there’s no way for me to explain it but to call it a mysterious power, the pieces were floating and melting and then she gathered them all together again and as you can see, it started working again. Really, it’s such a convenient ability!”

Khalija had been born in a family of Techno Weapon craftsmen, and her skills were so advanced that she was scouted by the Techno Weapons Research Division soon after she enlisted as a Knight.

Yasuo, who was not good with mechanical things, had no idea if Khalija’s knowledge of Techno Weapons would be useful in repairing a portable stove, but it appeared it was a piece of cake for her to fix them.

“Also, one of her arms is fractured, right? So I asked her if it wasn’t hard for her to do it with one hand, and she replied that for something of that level, one finger was more than enough. So I took the opportunity to have her fix this other stove as well!”

“The Colonel... did something like that...?”

“But, thanks to that I decided to believe in the existence of your magic. I don’t think it will take much more to convince me that this so-called other world exists as well. Especially if Shouko will be going there.”

“Are you okay with that?”

When Diana asked that, Kousuke nodded.

“It’s not a matter of being okay with it or not. I don’t think that whatever is inside Shouko is something doctors or a hospital can handle. Besides, if there is a world where magic exists and that thing came from over there, then I believe that we should let the people from that world remove it from her body.”

“.....To be honest, I could not bring myself to hope that you would be so understanding. Seeing as this will end up causing problems for your daughter’s studies as well.”

Kousuke smiled bitterly after hearing Hideo’s honest opinion.

“Well, if you think about it rationally, that might be true. It’s just that I had a similar experience as well, although on a smaller scale.”

“Eh?”

Could it be that Shouko’s father was also a person who had visited another world?

“This is not something I usually tell people, but I actually graduated from Tokyo University.”

“Eh!?”

The person who was most shocked by this statement was Yasuo.

“Oh yeah, even I only found out about that recently.”

Shouko’s voice from the kitchen also sounded like she felt uneasy about it.

It was true that he had an intellectual air about him, but Yasuo had not imagined that he had actually graduated from Tokyo University.

“So you opened this shop here right after you graduated?”

Of course, Hideo did not show any surprise and asked that question calmly. In response, Kousuke shook his head.

“No, I worked at an energy regulatory company for a few years after I graduated.”

The name of the company that Kousuke told them was so famous that even Yasuo had heard of it.

“It was boring, so I left.”

The job must have paid a pretty high salary, but he left it just because it was boring.

It was something that Yasuo could not understand at all.

Kousuke looked at Yasuo and smiled, as if he could read Yasuo's expression.

"Do you think that it's incomprehensible? Everyone around me told me the same thing, repeatedly. They asked me what the heck I was doing, in spite of graduating from Tokyo University and getting a job at a good company. However, don't you think they only spoke to me that way because I 『graduated from Tokyo University』? There's no law that says that a Tokyo University graduate isn't allowed to run a pub, right?"

"Well, that's true, but..."

"When I quit my job, people around me just had absurd expectations and asked me things like whether I was scouted by another company, or if I was starting up my own venture, or if I was moving overseas. Back then, I was already engaged to my wife and my parents were in good health. I intended on working in my hometown, so when I told my parents that, they were very shocked. I rebelled against them quite strongly, asking if it was really that strange."

Kousuke looked a little worn out as he recounted his experiences.

"Even school kids would often look at me like I was from a different planet when I told them that I was attending Tokyo University. Even now, you see ads on television with some strange criteria for measurement like 『The brand chosen by Tokyo University students』, right? Even though I was just a normal person like everybody else, the moment I got into Tokyo University, I was treated like I was somehow different. I'm sure there are some people who enjoy that feeling, but I couldn't endure that. I wonder if there is anyone who studied at Tokyo University who hasn't been called 『Student of Todai』 or 『Todai-kun』 at least once in their lives. That's why I decided to join a large company where being a graduate of Tokyo University would not be particularly rare."

"In a place like an energy regulatory company, I assume there were naturally cliques formed based on what college you studied at? Also, I assume when

dealing with administration or the government regulatory offices, the matter of what college you graduated from would only become even more important?”

Kousuke nodded strongly in reply to Hideo’s question.

“It was exactly as you said. There were a lot of people who said that I was special even among the people who graduated from Tokyo University. Well, in short, I was not suited for the status that came with being a graduate of Tokyo University. When I thought that after all the hard work I put into my studies, the destination I arrived at was a place where people only saw me through the filter of my alma mater’s name, I just got fed up with everything... Don’t you think that the title of 『Hero』 is also something similar to that?”

“I suppose... you’re right.”

The Hero, Hideo.

Khalija had already explained to Yasuo very clearly about the irresponsible wishes and hopes that the people placed upon that name.

Diana had also gone through hard times because of her family name.

Both Hideo and Diana could not treat Kousuke’s story as somebody else’s problem, and perhaps the reverse of that was true as well.

“Because of that, I became the kind of person who does not expect anything special from the result brought about by a 『school』. That is why I never did something like put on a frown and force Shouko to study. However... the fact that I let my disinterest go so far as to not hold any interest at all in her student life was bad. I was not able to pay attention to Shouko’s environment when she was in middle school. In that matter, I feel like I failed as a parent.”

“I told you, I don’t care about that anymore so you can just forget about it.”

“As your father, that is not something that I can just forget about.”

“Geez...”

Shouko probably wasn’t lying about the fact that she didn’t resent her father for not intervening.

However, it was still something that any parent would regret.

“...We got a bit off topic, but in any case, it’s like I said. Saying this may make me sound like a doting parent, but Shouko is not the kind of child who neglects her daily studies. Taking a break of one week from school is no big deal. If she herself wants to go, neither I nor my wife have any reason to stop her. As for the matter of what reason to give to her school, you can leave that up to us. Of course, as parents we will add the minimum condition that her safety will be thoroughly seen to at all times, but...”

“Of course, the Resteria Kingdom’s Knights will spare no effort in that regard!”

Diana replied enthusiastically and got a little ahead of herself, but Kousuke just smiled and looked at Yasuo.

“Having the Knights’ protection is well and good, but Shouko mentioned a different condition, right? I would appreciate it if you could accept that condition as well.”

“Dad!!!”

Shouko, who had picked up on her father’s intent, shouted from the other side of the kitchen counter with such force that it wouldn’t have been surprising if she jumped over it as well, but her father was not fazed in the least.

“Shouko. The frying pan has been on the fire for too long. The meat is going to get charred while you sauté it. Do it over.”

“Aaargh!! It’s your fault, Dad!!”

Shouko groaned after suddenly realizing it, but she still obediently went back to the frying pan on the stove with a bright red face.

While looking at Shouko behaving in that manner, Diana spoke.

“I discussed this with the people on the other side. If anything, it seems like they would be glad to have him come as well.”

“Eh?”

The condition that Shouko had attached was of course to have Yasuo accompany her.

However, Yasuo hadn’t heard anything about it until today, but it looked like

his father and mother were not surprised, so Yasuo looked at Diana in confusion.

Seeing that, Diana gave a small nod while looking slightly apologetic.

“.....My daughter became more cheerful after entering high school, and after she reuniting with you, she became even more lively. I’m sure this is a very important time for you as well, but I would like to leave her in your care. Yasuo-kun, Kanzaki-san, and Diana-san as well.”

“I... I’ll do my best.”

“Understood.”

“Even if it costs me my life!!”

Yasuo, Hideo, and Diana made their promises to that father who was worried about his only daughter.

“Alright, now our discussion is at an end! It looks like the fried food will be a little delayed because of me, but please, stay for a while and eat! Diana-san, the food will be freshly made this time, so eat as much as you like!”

“T-Thank you very much!”

At that point, Shouko appeared while carrying a tray with ceramic bowls on it, and placed a serving of stewed radish in front of the Kanzaki family members, Diana, and her father.

“Shouko. The bowls. None of them are facing in the correct direction.”

And then, she received that ruthless reprimand from her father.

“Ah! I’m so sorry!”

Perhaps as a result of not being strict with her studies, it appeared that Kousuke was strict when it came to serving etiquette instead. On hearing his reprimand, Shouko hurriedly fixed the positioning of the bowls and set the table as per the rules.

Diana’s eyes sparked as she looked at the radish that had been boiled in miso soup and garnished with yuzu zest, and even Hideo and Madoka widened their eyes at the effect of the presentation.

“This is a good opportunity, so let’s call this a sending-off party for the trip to Ante Lande. Everyone, I look forward to getting to know you better in the future. Now, come on, eat up!”

Shouko looked satisfied at the reactions of everyone present.

“Shouko, aren’t you supposed to say something?”

“Ah, that’s right. Everyone, please enjoy your meal!”

“W-Well, then...”

Yasuo was the first one to take a bite of the radish that had been boiled until it was soft enough for the chopsticks to sink into it.

“.....Delicious.”

“Oh my, that’s delicious!”

Yasuo and Madoka spoke up at the same time, and Hideo took another bite while nodding.

As for Diana, her bowl was already empty.

“Shouko... it was... It was really good!!”

“Yay.”

Seeing his daughter smile with a happy expression on her face, Kousuke suddenly looked up.

“Shouko, I need to get something from the back room. Kenzaki-san, please excuse me for a minute.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Ah, certainly.”

Kousuke, who excused himself temporarily from the table, went towards the living quarters instead of the back room of the store.

In the living room that could not be seen from the store, there was a woman sitting on the tatami mat.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join us?”

“.....”

“It looks like you’re not very convinced.”

“Of course not. Thinking about it rationally, how could I accept something like that?”

Shouko’s mother, Tatewaki Youko, gave a large sigh and pursed her lips.

Both Shouko and Kousuke knew that Youko was at home.

However, since she stubbornly refused to appear in front of the Kenzaki family, they had to use the hastily contrived excuse of her having gone out on 『personal business』 despite the fact that an important conversation was about to take place.

Her eyes, behind large spectacles, were looking towards a particularly large stuffed animal in the room.

It was the magic-using version of the mascot of the most famous theme park in the world, located in the Chiba prefecture.

“So lucky, so lucky, Shouko is so lucky... A world of dreams and magic... that sounds so nice...”

Looking at his wife who looked vexed as she wrung the neck of the stuffed animal mascot of the most famous theme park in the world that was located in the Chiba prefecture, Kousuke gave a smile with mixed feelings.

Shouko’s 『Obsession with Princesses』 that stuck with her from kindergarten until middle school was quite obviously because of her mother.

In the first place, the underlying reason why Shouko, who had an introverted personality, started to search within herself for 『an ideal young woman』 that did not exist was because of the influence of this mother of hers who was an enthusiast of that most famous theme park in the world that was located in the Chiba prefecture.

Of course, he had no intention of blaming his wife for something like that, and Shouko didn’t feel that way either.

However, looking at his wife who would still lead the charge into the most famous theme park in the world that was located in the Chiba prefecture with the enthusiasm of a school girl despite the fact that she was more than forty

years old, and who was even now was showing envy toward her own daughter who had come in contact with 『real magic』, although he didn't know how serious she was about it, he started to worry whether she would once again have a bad influence of Shouko.

“.....It's alright. I'm still an adult, after all.”

Youko let out a sigh, maybe because she sensed the suspicious gaze of her husband.

“I know that Shouko is going through a lot of trouble. It's just that, when that child entered highschool and her personality changed, and during the time when she transformed into that outrageous thing called a Shii or whatever, I wasn't able to deal with it at all, and I was forced to realize that I was far from being able to get close to her heart or to her life. That was a little damaging.”

“I'm not much different in that regard.”

“.....So, what did you think of Yasuo-kun? Does he look reliable?”

“.....Honestly, I don't know. But... we have no choice but to leave her to him. Since we can't go along with her, after all.”

“After grade school, middle school, and high school, she's now going to a different world... why is it that parents can only stay with their children for such a short time?”

Youko's sigh as she threw herself upon the low table in the living room along with the mascot character of the most famous theme park in the world that was located in the Chiba prefecture coincided perfectly with the sigh of her husband.

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“Is it really okay for me to go along as well?”

It was night, after the nerve-wracking visit to the Tatewaki family house.

Diana, Khalija, Yasuo, and Nodoka were in Room 101 of the Marigold Hills apartment building.

There were pastel colored cups placed on the casual kotatsu, and steam was rising from the cups filled with warm tea.

The four of them were casually sitting on the simple-yet cute-cushions that Nodoka had picked out when Diana had first moved to this apartment.

“By the way, just how are you communicating with Ante Lande, Diana-san? It’s not like you have a cell phone that connects to that world or anything, right?”

“There is a type of sorcery for relaying messages. It is something like sending a letter.”

“Doesn’t that cost money to use, like the Gate Tower?”

“It is not completely free of cost, but for example if you consider the Gate Tower to be an aeroplane that carries a single person, then the Messaging Sorcery is like a home delivery service carried on a bike. There is a limit to the amount of information that can be transmitted at once, but the expense is not high enough to make a member of the Knights Division hesitate.”

The example using an aeroplane was easy for Yasuo and Nodoka to understand, but there was still something that felt off.

“But still, I wonder why Shouko-san wants to go along with someone like Onii-chan... Sure, traveling with just my father and Diana-san might be awkward for her, but still... It’s sort of like chartering a new flight just for Onii-chan, right?”

“Since that was the condition put forward by Shouko, there was nothing else we could do. Also, to tell you the truth, both my mother and I wanted Yasuo to come, even if it stretched the budget a bit.”

“Eh? Why’s that!?”

From the way Nodoka said that, it could be seen that she was greatly dissatisfied.

“Before that, it might be a little late to ask this, but... Are you willing to go, Yasuo?”

Diana checked with Yasuo about how he felt before replying to Nodoka.

“Well... if I take a week off from school, the guys from school will probably annoy me about it once I get back... But despite that, I am still more worried about Tatewaki-san, and if I have the opportunity to go, I feel like I should take

it.”

“Onii-chan, that’s not like you at all.”

“However, I know that it costs an insane amount of money, and should I have wanted to go, it would have only put more strain on Diana and the others, so I wasn’t able to bring it up myself.”

“That’s right, it’s not too late to back out.”

“Nodoka, I think that you should leave it at that.”

Nodoka, who was the exact opposite of Diana and couldn’t sit still without rejecting her brother in some way or another, was gently pacified by Khalija.

“In the first place, I received a message from my mother at almost the same time when Hideo said that he wanted to go to Ante Lande. She asked me to try and bring Hideo over, at least for a short while.”

This was something that both Yasuo and Nodoka had already heard, on the night when Hideo had declared that he would be going to Ante Lande.

However, the circumstances surrounding Diana’s mother, Erijina Krone and the people around her, were somewhat vague.

“The reason why Her Excellency Erijina is impatient about inviting Hideo this time is..... because of me.”

“Does that mean that the organization that tempted you, Carnelian of the Coal Mine or whatever, have become a threat?”

At that question from Nodoka, who had heard about the situation from Khalija herself, both the Magitech Knights nodded as one.

“In the thirty years since the military campaign against Demon King Kaul, the organization known as The Carnelian of the Coal Mine has not only helped the people from Torjesso, but also other war refugees as well. Their power is limited to not just Resteria, but is spread out among the surrounding smaller countries as well. It is obvious that an organization with such a large scope will have interactions with a great number of people, and that gives rise to certain interests that those people would like to protect. In that sort of situation..... I, who hold the rank of Colonel in Resteria’s core army and also have the blood of

Torjesso flowing through my veins, yielded to a person who could control the Shii that were threatening the whole world. I'm sure Her Excellency Erijina considers this to be a very heavy problem."

"The governing body of Resteria is convinced that the Shii are not merely frightening monsters that randomly appeared. I'm sure that the surrounding small countries will come to the same conclusion sooner or later. Once that happens, the world will... become a place where everyone doubts whether their neighbor is someone who can communicate with the Shii."

"With a clearly defined enemy, such as the armies of Demon King Kaul, the people needed to only look for trouble in one direction. However, constantly questioning whether the person next to you might suddenly kill you, that will easily distract people from the threat and cause friction. It's the same in this world as well, right?"

Back during the World War, the countries that fought knew who their enemies were.

However, in the modern age that Yasuo lived in, people were exposed to danger from 『terrorists』 whose identity was unclear, and the sources of that danger were extremely flexible and had no rigid form. Everybody was aware that they could easily blend into society and hide from sight.

And the social problem that arose from that was...

"A tendency to expulse all sources of threats..."

"That's right. Once the persecution of the former citizens of Torjesso, other war refugees, and anyone connected to The Carnelian of the Coal Mine begins, it will be difficult to stop. However, if the people being persecuted don't have any way of proving that they are not allied with the Shii, they will never be free of suspicion. The hatred and sorrow of both the people being persecuted and the people doing the persecuting will just continue to grow. No matter how many pretty speeches are made, neither side will accept it. Before something like that happens..."

"Shouko, who holds the key to understanding more about the true nature of the Shii. The Saviour, Hideo. And then... more than anything else, my mother wants to understand the extent of your current strength, Yasuo. That is what

she said to me.”

“My strength? Do I have anything of that sort?”

“Does Onii-chan’s power really have that much meaning? I mean, all he can do is send Shii off with the song...”

“That is extremely important.”

Seeing that the siblings were confused, Diana and Khalija glanced at each other.

“Yasuo’s fighting ability is no match for our own, let alone Hideo’s. However, when it comes to Yasuo’s ability to send off the Shii with the requiem or his healing powers, even if you search far and wide in Ante Lande, you won’t find many who can equal him.”

“I-Is that so?”

“At the very least, there are likely none in Resteria.”

Diana’s proclamation only served to deepen Yasuo’s confusion.

“Being able to stop a Shii that is still active with just the song, and sending off three of them at once and still not running out of mana, such things are usually impossible by our standards. That power... there is a chance that it might become the impetus for saving Ante Lande, or at least that is what my mother thinks.”

“I don’t think that’s possible at all~”

“Even Japan has a method of solving disputes using means other than armed conflict, right? Of course, just that will not be enough to end all the fighting, but not using it all will also lead to a lengthening of the conflict. However, Ante Lande and this world are similar in the fact that the problems are not so simple that they can be solved by the power or ideas of one person. A balance is needed in everything.”

“Yasuo’s power has the potential to bring a new balance to the situation that Ante Lande has currently fallen into. That is why, as long as Yasuo is okay with it..... we would be glad to have him come to our world.”

“.....”

He was told that he had talent and power, and that people would rely on him.

More importantly, he had already gathered experience to support that belief, even though it was only a little.

This was something that had never happened since the time he had begun to think and make choices for himself.

“.....I wonder if it is okay for me to get cocky.”

Hearing Yasuo mutter that, Nodoka frowned and Khalija gave a small smile and nodded.

“Just letting you know, I won’t let you get carried away. For some reason, everyone around you has been too soft on you lately, Onii-chan. Geez.”

After saying that, Nodoka stood up.

“I’m going back home. I have homework, and I need to take a bath as well.”

“Oh, then I will accompany you.”

“It’s fine. My house is right over there.”

“Do not show the slightest gap or carelessness. That is what is required of a soldier.”

Even though Nodoka looked a little annoyed, Khalija just gave a wry smile and went along with her.

After the two of them left, Yasuo asked once more, to make sure.

“It’s really okay for me to go, right?”

“Yes. That is something that both Shouko and my mother wished for, and more than anything, I wanted you to come along as well.”

“You too?”

“Yes. I used to think that Japan, the 『Birthplace of the Hero』 was some sort of utopia or Shangri-La. After actually living here, I came to realize that it is just an ordinary world, with amazing things, strange things, and things that I cannot accept. I think you must have felt the same way about 『Ante Lande』, as it only exists in your imagination so far. I think that letting you see it for yourself would be a very good thing..... Also, this is just my personal opinion, but...”

Diana smiled, looked straight at Yasuo, took a sip of her tea that had gone cold, and then once again showed a smile that was like a blooming flower.

“I want Yasuo to see the country where I was born.”

“.....”

Those unexpected words made Yasuo stiffen his body.

“The country and world that I come from, that you said you wanted to protect... The Hero that Resteria and Ante Lande are looking for is still Hideo, but... to me, you are the Hero now, Yasuo.”

“Uh, no, that is...”

Yasuo looked flustered, but Diana just tilted her head and carried on.

“I’m serious, you know? I’m not just trying to flatter you.”

“That is... When you say something like that to my face, I...”

Even admitting that it was embarrassing would be embarrassing.

Diana was still smiling, as if she found the sight of Yasuo struggling for words to be amusing.

“When you sent off my father, when you said that you would become the Hero, and when you didn’t back down a single step even when fighting against the Colonel... to me, you looked just like the Hero that I had dreamed of in the past.”

“T-That is...”

When she said that he looked like the Hero she had dreamed of, did that mean that she was confusing him with his father who apparently had used to look identical to him?

Although Yasuo couldn’t tell if she had guessed what he was thinking about or not, the amount of teasing in Diana’s smile suddenly increased.

“Who knows? I wonder which one I am seeing.”

Wasn’t she just playing around with him?

It was only recently that Yasuo had learned that Diana was actually older than

him, but ever since she had started to live with Khalija, Diana had started to state things confidently on many occasions.

It looked like she was holding a grudge against him for agreeing with Nodoka and saying that her personality was childish.

“W-Well, in any case, seeing as you said it’s fine for me to go, I’ll do just that. Right then, I should get going as well. Yeah.”

“Sure. I’ll accompany you.”

“No, it’s fine. My house is just...”

“I’m just going to say the same thing that the Colonel said, you know.”

“.....Okay, fine.”

“Right then, let’s go.”

After standing up and walking outside, Diana properly locked the front door before accompanying Yasuo to his house that was just on the other side of the road.

For the few seconds it took to reach his house, Yasuo peeked at Diana’s face as they walked in silence, and thought the following.

Guarding him for the few seconds it would take to reach his house.

At the very least, he wanted to grow strong enough so that she would not worry about him walking such a trivial distance on his own.

“Yasuo? Is something wrong?”

Diana turned towards Yasuo after catching him staring at her.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Yasuo just said that and shook his head.

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It was night, two days later.

The Kenzaki Family, the Tatewaki family, and the two Magitech Knights were gathered at the Tokorozawa Aviation Memorial Park.

They were gathered to send off Hideo, Diana, Yasuo, and Shouko, who were

about to travel to the other world.

In the sky was a spiralling tower within which the stars swirled, and the slightly dark entrance to the other world, the 『Gate Tower』, opened up, just like it had when Khalija had summoned it one week earlier.

Hideo carried Yasuo, and Diana carried Shouko. It didn't really look like they were about to travel to another world.

However, Tatewaki Kousuke and Youko just stared up at mute amazement as the four of them rose up into the air.

“Dear, and Nodoka! Take care of things here!”

“Khalija-san, please take care of the rest!”

“Well then, see you later!”

“Mom, Dad, don't expect any souvenirs, okay~!”

The four of them rose rapidly upwards as if they were being sucked into the Gate Tower, and as they watched, their forms became smaller and smaller.

“.....It's really unbelievable.”

Youko only nodded after hearing what Kousuke said.

“Even Onii-chan and I are still constantly being surprised by all of this.”

Nodoka said that as a representative of the normal people in the group, and moved closer to the Tatewaki couple.

“While your daughter is absent, I will put my life on the line to protect the Restaurant Saburou, so please be at ease.”

Khalija, who had healed her right arm in preparation for the time when Hideo would leave, gave a respectful bow while dressed in her Magitech Knight uniform.

“Everyone, please be careful.”

As if Madoka's whisper was the signal, the four of them disappeared into the night sky.

At the same time, the spiral of stars whirled furiously, and broke apart after

leaving behind a single flare of light. After that, the only thing left behind was a starless sky.

The Hero of Salvation once again traveled between the worlds.



Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Chapter 2

Interlude – 1

“Khalija-san, do you think Onii-chan and the others would have reached Ante Lande by now?”

“I think it might take a little while longer.”

“What are they going to do once they get there?”

“Most likely, they will be welcomed as guests and enter the house of the Krone family, and receive an explanation about the current state of affairs. During their stay in Resteria, Major Krone and Her Excellency Erijina will be looking after them.”

“Haah. That sounds nice. Diana-san is from a family of important nobles, right? I bet they eat really tasty food, and the bedrooms are massive with the bed placed right in the center.”

“Maybe. Did you want to go as well, Nodoka?”

“Me? Hmm, I dunno. If we were going there on vacation, then maybe?”

“If people found out that you were the daughter of The Hero, Hideo, you would be caught in a hailstorm of marriage proposals.”

“Yeah, I don’t particularly want to end up as a gold digger in another world. Ah, but would Onii-chan receive the same treatment? Uwaah, I can almost see him get carried away with lecherous thoughts and getting scolded by Diana-san.”

“No, rather than Major Krone, I think it would be Shouko...”

“Eh?”

“.....No, it’s nothing. In any case, this is an informal visit. Most likely, they will

not interact much with people other than the Krone family.”

“Yeah, but it is still the house of the most important nobles in the kingdom, right? I bet there are people like butlers and maids. Aargh, it looks like Onii-chan is going to make some good memories, it really pisses me off.”

“Hahaha...”

Chapter 2 – Beginning of an Adventure

The first thing he noticed was the smell of damp soil.

Also, the sound of running water.

“Ugh...”

Yasuo’s consciousness slowly returned along with a feeling of blurred vision and stiff limbs, as if he had taken a long afternoon nap.

“.....Wha?”

The reason why he was smelling damp soil was because it was raining.

A gentle rain fell incessantly, and it felt like the humid air was sticking to his body as it surrounded him.

The moment he fully regained his senses, he realized that the thunderous sound he had been hearing was not merely his ears ringing, but instead was rising up from his surroundings.

“A r-river?”

When he attempted to stand up suddenly, he slipped in the slimy mud under his feet and nearly fell down.

“What the heck is thiiiis!?”

When he finally realized what kind of situation he was in, Yasuo unintentionally let out a loud shout.

He appeared to be on a sandbar in a large river, surrounded by a thick forest.

The river was fast-flowing, and wide.

The reason why his body and clothes only felt slightly damp despite the rain

and the location he was in was because he was underneath the branches of the only tree that grew on the sandbar.

“Where am I? Is this Resteria?”

He couldn't stop himself from saying that aloud, despite knowing that it couldn't be true.

Even though it was an informal visit, he had entered the Gate Tower along with Diana, his father, and Shouko after being invited by the Resteria Kingdom.

However...

“.....Tatewaki-san.”

Yasuo hurriedly scanned his surroundings.

“Diana?”

Although he finally managed to stand up by holding on to the tree, his feet were still unsteady.

“Dad!?”

He was alone.

He couldn't find any traces of the other three people who had supposedly entered the Gate Tower along with him.

“What... is going on...”

No matter how he thought about it, his current situation looked like the result of the Gate Tower malfunctioning.

A strong gust of wind caused both Yasuo and the tree to shake violently.

The rain also seemed to have gotten stronger at the same time, as the river seemed to be flowing faster and the volume of water also started to increase.

“This is bad...”

Yasuo once again fruitlessly looked around, but even with the most optimistic estimation, the distance between the sandbar and the riverbank was over five meters.

What's more, the riverbank was much higher than the muddy and surging

water's surface, and with Yasuo's physical ability, it did not look like he would be able to make it in one leap.

However, even as he watched, the area of land available to stand on the sandbank gradually reduced due to the increase in the volume of water.

At this rate, he would be swept away.

It happened just as he was thinking that.

"There you are!!"

Hearing that faint voice, Yasuo turned in the direction it came from and shouted on impulse.

"Tatewaki-san!?"

Shouko was standing on the riverbank.

However, she did not look normal.

The voice and attire certainly belonged to Shouko, but both of her eyes were emitting black flames, for one.

If it was just that, it would still be within acceptable limits, but there appeared to be fire gushing out of both her wrists and ankles, and even from her waist.

"I'm coming for you! Stay right there!"

"Huh?"

Without even giving him time to frame a question, Shouko jumped with the speed of a bullet from the riverbank to the sandbar where Yasuo was.

"Uwaah!!"

In the next instant, she took Yasuo under one arm and jumped up again without caring about the muddy ground, and carried him over to the opposite side of the river.

While Yasuo was staring agape at her astounding physical ability, Shouko put him down and grabbed his hand.

"Yasu-kun! It's really you, right? Are you hurt!? Are you okay!?"

"Uhh, yeah, how about you, Tatewaki-san?"

“I’m perfectly fine!”

As Yasuo somehow managed an answer while still being in shock, the black flames gradually started to disappear from around Shouko’s body.

“Thank goodness...! I thought I heard your voice, so I thought to check, just in case...! Thank goodness you’re alright!”

In just a few seconds, the black flames had retreated to just Shouko’s left eye.

“Haah... Now that I’m relieved... I feel kind of weak”

“Ah!”

Shouko looked disconcerted.

Just as Yasuo thought that Shouko’s eyes were closing, she suddenly fell to her knees.

“Tatewaki-san!?”

“Sorry... I just feel really weak... My head is spinning... I need to lie down for a bit...”

“Ah, are you okay? Here, lean on my shoulder, there is a large tree over there, so...”

“Yeah... Thanks...”

Despite having just shown astounding movements that looked like those of a Magitech Knight, Shouko’s face was now pale, as if suffering from the backlash of that.

While supporting Shouko, Yasuo distanced himself from the riverbank that looked like it could crumble at any moment, and got closer to the outer edge of the forest. He moved towards a conspicuously large tree with wide branches and broad leaves, and leaned against the trunk.

“T-This place should be fine...”

As he helped Shouko sit on a large and thick tree root, he saw that Shouko was breathing heavily as she leaned against the tree trunk.

“Sorry... I’ll recover in a minute... I just feel a little anaemic.”

“I-It’s going to be fine. I’m sure you’re just exhausted because of what happened earlier, thank you, everything’s going to be alright.”

Caught in the middle of a situation he didn’t understand at all, Yasuo could not stop the flood of meaningless words that came out of his mouth, but even so, after meeting up with Shouko, he felt a little hope come back into his heart.

Just what had happened for them to end up in such a situation?

What had happened to Diana and his father?

What was this place?

Were they really on Ante Lande?

“Haaah... Haah...”

While listening to Shouko’s rough breathing settle down just a little, Yasuo finally remembered what had happened just before he ended up in this place.

※

Yasuo once again entered the Gate Tower that he had previously entered to keep Shouko from being taken away, while riding on the back of his father again after more than ten years.

Yasuo, who had heard that a one-way trip would take about two hours, feared that he would need to piggyback on his father’s back for two hours despite being eighteen years old, but as soon as they entered the Gate Tower and the entrance closed, Hideo and Diana put down Yasuo and Shouko, whom they had been carrying.

“Uwaah.”

“Ugh.”

Unable to see a floor to put their feet on, both Yasuo and Shouko stumbled.

However, within the starry path where they could see a vast region that looked like outer space which extended far beneath their feet, the four of them were currently standing at exactly the same level, on what appeared to be an invisible platform.

“So this is... the path to the other world...”

“Do we just have to keep walking in a straight line?”

Diana shook her head at Yasuo’s question.

“No. Once the entrance closes, we can just let it carry us along. It is not necessary to walk.”

“Eh? In that case...”

“Yes. Even if you were to go to sleep here, you will eventually reach the Ante Lande, via the Gate Tower in Resteria.”

“It almost feels too easy. It’s like we are being carried in an invisible car or something, right?”

“If you must forcefully compare it to something from Japan, wouldn’t it be a travelator instead? I only used one for the first time after coming to Japan, so I’m not really sure, but I’ve heard that if you walk in the direction of the travel here, you will actually be able to shorten the time required for the journey... Hideo?”

Diana, who had been caught up in answering Shouko’s question, suddenly noticed that Hideo’s face had gone pale and he was sitting down.

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

“Are you okay? Do you feel ill.....”

“I have some tea, would you like some?”

“Aah, no, thank you. Sorry, I just felt a little dizzy...”

“Hey, come on, pull yourself together.”

Yasuo was rubbing his father’s back while speaking to him in a scolding tone, when he suddenly started to feel strangely anxious.

“Are you nervous or something?”

“.....No, that’s not it.”

Yasuo tried to talk casually to make Hideo feel better, but Hideo’s face was still grim.

“I... Both your mother and I don’t know how we first arrived at Ante Lande.”

“Ah, yeah, I heard about that earlier...”

“My head... hurts, what is this...”

“Hey, Dad?”

“Hideo!? What’s wrong?”

“O-Oji-san, are you okay?”

“O-Oi, Diana, that reminds me, didn’t Khalija-san say something about mass being a limiting factor or something!? There are four of us in here, will that cause any problems...”

“T-That shouldn’t be the case! This was originally just meant to be a path for my return and Hideo’s summoning, but since Yasuo and Shouko will be traveling along with us, we made sure to take that into consideration from the other side and increase the output accordingly, so there shouldn’t be any problems with the mass!”

“Ugh... Ahh!!”

“Dad!”

“Oji-san!”

“You three, get away from me... Aahhhhhhh!?”

Inside the Gate Tower with the swirling stars, Hideo screamed and began to shine with light.

“T-This light, don’t tell me!”

“The Holy Sword, Liutberga!”

“I-It’s too bright, I can’t keep my eyes open.....”

“Diana-chan! Take care of Yasuo and Shouko-chan—!!”

That was the last thing that Yasuo remembered hearing.

Hideo started shining brighter than any star within the Gate Tower, and everyone closed their eyes against that light. Everything was dyed in a white color.

While they were inside the Gate tower, his father had suddenly complained about feeling unwell, and started to give off the same light as when he was summoned along with the Holy Sword.

He didn't have any memories after they were engulfed within that light, and when he woke up, he found himself on a sandbar in the river.

"Was the problem caused due to some factor in Dad or his holy sword that didn't agree with the Gate Tower?"

As a child of modern times who had a fair amount of interest in games and anime, Yasuo desperately searched his fantasy-related knowledge and came up with that hypothesis.

For some reason, the sorcery used to construct the Gate Tower had bad affinity with Hideo's Holy Sword Liutberga, or perhaps with Hideo himself.

Due to that, the Gate Tower malfunctioned and did not work as it was supposed to.

"Understanding that doesn't help us, though!!"

Yasuo shouted that on impulse.

Even if he understood that, there was no changing the fact that he and Shouko were isolated in a completely unfamiliar land.

"Dammit... In any case, I should probably call Dad over..."

There was no disputing the fact that they were in an unfavorable situation.

Luckily, he had managed to reunite with Shouko, and Diana was not the kind of weak person who would get into trouble, no matter what her circumstances.

In that case, he first needed to meet up with his father.

Yasuo cleared his throat with a small cough, and started reciting the chant in a resonant voice.

『The Hero, Hideo, is the person who will obtain victory for new frontiers! Wings, go forth! Flower petals, take flight! Gather the shining azure sunlight! Avatar of the wind, Holy Sword Liutberga! Answer my call and take form!』

"Haa... Haa..."

For a while, the only sounds that reached Yasuo's ears were the sound of the raindrops hitting the leaves, the sound of the flowing river, and the sound of Shouko's breathing.

".....Eh?"

Nothing happened.

That chant was used to summon his father's holy sword, Liutberga.

When Yasuo chanted it, his father would be transported instantaneously even between the distance from Shin-Yokohama and Tokorozawa, but he didn't appear this time.

".....Eh?"

His heart rate suddenly sped up.

Did he make a mistake in the chant?

Yasuo hurriedly pulled his Slimphone out of his pocket and opened the memo pad application.

Yasuo had copied the chant to summon the Liutberga into his Slimphone and his pocket diary, just in case he ever forgot the wording.

That is why he suddenly felt extremely anxious when he read out what he had written word for word, and neither his father nor his father's holy sword showed any signs of appearing.

"O-Oi, you've got to be kidding..."

Until now, he had managed to stay calm no matter how serious the situation looked because he had the safety net of being able to call his father over at any time.

However, right now, the foundations of that safety net were instantly demolished.

"W-What's going on... Just what the heck..."

However, the situation did not even give Yasuo the time to panic.

"Yasu-kun...!"

All of a sudden, Shouko grabbed onto him from the side and covered his mouth with her hand.

“Whahnngmff”

He was about to say “What are you doing?” but after hearing Shouko’s tense whisper close to his ear, his body stiffened.

“Something big is coming this way. Stay quiet.”

However, Yasuo couldn’t hear anything of that sort.

Moreover, since he was being hugged by Shouko almost directly from the side, the only thing he could hear was the loud sound of his own heartbeat.

They stayed that way for about a minute.

As far as Yasuo, who was experiencing a state of being stuck close to a girl he knew, was concerned, that time seemed to stretch on for eternity, but then he finally heard the sound Shouko had spoken about.

It sounded like the trees in the forest were being pushed aside by something large.

Along with that, he heard the sound of something stepping on the ground with thick feet.

Just as Shouko had said, something massive was coming closer.

“I think it’s coming from behind us. It shouldn’t be able to see us because of the trees, but...”

Even Shouko’s whisper sounded extremely tense.

Eventually, they heard something that sounded like the 『giant creature’s』 breathing.

The only thing the two of them could do was to stick close to the tree and pray that the 『giant creature』 would go away without noticing them.

The breathing sound was coming from a fairly high place. At the very least, the sound was coming from one meter above Yasuo’s height.

Moreover, they could smell the beast’s stink even through the rain.

The distinctly offensive odor that was overpowering the smell of the rain and soil was coming from the mysterious giant beast's breath.

“.....!!”

On the other side of the tree that Yasuo and Shouko were hiding behind, they could feel the presence of the creature as it turned toward the direction opposite them.

The heavy footsteps moved away from them at a surprisingly fast speed, and after the two of them judged that it had gone far enough from them, they finally moved away from each other and peeked at 『that creature』 from behind the tree trunk.

It wasn't like Yasuo was knowledgeable about all the various animals that existed on Earth.

However, he was sure that there were no animals in Japan that were larger than an elephant and covered in alligator-like scales.

Even after the creature disappeared into the rain and its footsteps could no longer be heard, Yasuo continued to stare in that direction without moving.

“Yasu-kun... As I thought, this place really is...”

Hearing Shouko's whisper as she continued to stare in the direction in which the mysterious creature had disappeared, Yasuo replied in a dazed tone.

“Yeah... It's Ante Lande. We are...”

“Stranded here, aren't we?”

Shouko said that in a hoarse voice within the drizzling rain and with the forest's broad-leaved trees blocking her line of sight.

“Haaah... I seem to have recovered somewhat, for now. Yasu-kun, how do you feel?”

Once they could no longer see or hear the mysterious giant creature, Shouko finally stood up.

Her face, which had been white as a sheet earlier, finally had a tinge of color again.

“I... am fine, thanks to you, Tatewaki-san. Are you sure... that’s okay?”

Yasuo nervously asked her.

It was true that some color had returned to Shouko’s face.

However, the black flames of the Shii were still leaking out of her left eye.

“Ah, this thing? It feels like I can’t get it to disappear, no matter how hard I try. It should be fine, though. It’s been like this for the past hour, since I woke up here.”

“H-Hour!?”

Those words had a greater impact on Yasuo than she had intended.

At the very least, it would mean that Yasuo and Shouko had already been stranded in this unknown place for more than an hour.

Also, neither his father nor Diana were in any sort of condition to come and save them.

Moreover, the fact that he woke up on the sandbar meant that Shouko had been all alone in a forest which had that kind of giant creature, even if it was only for an hour.

“I’m really glad that nothing bad happened... No, I suppose we ended up in this mess because something bad happened.”

The state of Shouko’s left eye was proof that something bad had indeed happened, but she understood what Yasuo was trying to say and gave a small smile.

“Well... I don’t really understand the difficult stuff, but... I suppose for once I should be thankful for this thing.”

“Eh?”

“I’m not sure why, but... It was the same thing back then and just now, but when the flames get stronger, I start to hear and see things very well. My body also feels lighter. But... The reason why I felt so weak earlier is because I think that sort of power up has a time limit... Putting it like that, it feels like I’m on some dangerous drugs or something. Hahaha.”

Shouko explained that while talking quickly, but that conclusion was something that made sense to Yasuo as well.

Earlier, Shouko had detected the approach of that creature far more quickly than Yasuo had.

Back when she had rescued Yasuo from the sandbar, her physical ability had looked close to that which she had when she had been completely taken over by the Shii.

“Well, I was saved thanks to that power. Now, and earlier as well.”

“Really? But, it’s hard to tell which one of us is the Hero candidate now.”

Shouko nodded while still smiling, but there was a hint of relief in her expression as well.

“I suppose I should ask just to make sure, but do you have any idea where we are, Yasu-kun?”

“No, not at all.”

“Yeah, I thought so. I looked around for a bit before I found you, but this place looks pretty dangerous. Everything about this place is different from Japan, even down to the weeds. Moreover, the fact that neither Diana-san nor Oji-san have still not shown up even after this much time means...”

“.....Yeah.”

“By the way, what you chanted earlier was the incantation to summon your father, right? Did it work?”

“No, normally my father would have appeared instantly along with a massive amount of light. Since that didn’t happen, that means...”

“This is the worst... Is this my fault, after all?”

“Eh? Why would you think that?”

Yasuo turned to look at Shouko after hearing something he didn’t expect, but it looked like she was serious.

“I mean, just look at me. I’m like this.”

She pointed at her left eye with a serious expression.

“The Shii are enemies of the people who live in Ante Lande, right? Maybe I triggered some barrier or something that is meant to repel enemies or demons, which caused the magic to go haywire, or something like that.”

It looked like Shouko was also a child of the modern times, as she had come up with her own explanation of the situation.

Yasuo rejected Shouko’s hypothesis and told her that his father’s holy sword was probably the cause.

“I heard that my father and mother didn’t use the Gate Tower when they first appeared in Ante Lande. If there was any factor that caused a problem, it was my father or his holy sword. Do you remember? My dad started shining right after we entered the Gate Tower, right? It was probably because of that.”

“I see...”

However, Shouko’s expression did not change to one of relief.

“So, what do we do next?”

“.....In any case, the only thing to do now is to 『search for civilization』. And maybe probably look for water and food as well?”

“I brought along a bento, tea, and some snacks... But the bento is only enough for one person. Ahh... I moved around so much when I saved you earlier, Yasukun, I bet the contents of the bento are all mixed up.”

“I didn’t bring a bento... but I did bring water and some snacks.”

“Ah, I have some instant miso soup as well.”

“Miso soup?”

“You know how you hear about people who go abroad getting desperate for a taste of Japanese food? I heard that we would be staying for at least a week, so I only brought four packets.”

“I see.”

No matter what the reasoning was, anything that they could safely eat was a blessing in this situation.

“Aah, I wish it would at least stop raining.”

“Really? I’m glad that it’s raining.”

“Eh, really?”

“Yeah, I guess... well then, shall we?”

“Yeah, let’s start moving.”

The two of them stood up sluggishly.

“Yasu-kun, do you have any rain gear?”

“I did bring this, just in case.”

Yasuo pulled out a small folding umbrella.

“I suppose it’s better than nothing.”

“Yeah, as long as the path doesn’t become too treacherous to walk on.”

“You’re right. The branches of the trees in this forest are quite wide, I think we won’t get that wet if we walk under them.”

“Which way should we go?”

“We should follow the river... or that’s what I would like to say, but...”

In a wooded area like this, walking along the bank of a river that wasn’t reinforced would be suicidal.

At the very least, getting close to that fast-flowing river while it was still raining was not a good idea.

Not only was the rain hampering their vision, the swiftly flowing water would be eroding the river bank and there was a chance of them suddenly losing their footing.

“How about that way, then?”

“.....I wonder if it’s safe.”

Yasuo was pointing in the direction in which that mysterious creature from earlier had left.

“It’s been a while since then, I think it should be fine. Besides, it’s raining.”

“What about the rain?”

“The thing passed right by us, but didn’t notice us. I think the water washed out our scent. If not for that, I think it would have probably found us. Also... take a look at the trees around us. I only caught a glimpse of it from behind, but I don’t think it’s carnivorous.”

“How can you tell?”

“Seeing how big it is compared to the trees here, I think it must be eating whatever is the most plentiful in the forest in order to maintain that size.”

“In other words, it eats things like tree leaves or grass?”

“Well, if the logic from Earth still applies here, then yes.”

Judging by the situation, the two of them were definitely on Ante Lande.

In that case, it was possible that they might run into something that could not be measured by the common sense of Japan or Earth.

There was a very good chance of them running into some creature or monster that did not follow the rules of the food chain as seen on Earth.

To use a commonly known example, there could be monsters like slimes that fed by dissolving the bodies of their prey.

There could be demi-human races like goblins, or giant carnivorous plants with advanced abilities to catch their prey.

There could even be things like grotesque demons that overturned the conventional concepts of a food chain. For examples, remnants of the demon hordes that Demon King Kaul had released into the land.

“So, Tatewaki-san, let’s move slowly. Keep looking at your surroundings, and if something seems even slightly strange, let’s stop moving immediately until both of us are convinced that it is safe. No matter what happens, we should always stay within sight of each other.”

“That’s right... Wait, what about...”

“Going to the toilet?”

“.....! W-Well, yeah!”

Seeing Yasuo use the word “toilet” so easily, Shouko’s face once again turned

red and the flame in her left eye got a little stronger.

However, Yasuo still spoke in a serious tone while continually glancing at his surroundings.

“I guess that is unavoidable. But... Ah, that’s right.”

Yasuo suddenly remembered that he had a dictionary of English words that he had packed in his luggage, intending to read it in Resteria if he had nothing else to do.

“We can use pages from the dictionary as toilet paper. Even regular paper should be usable if we wipe firmly.”

“I-I see.”

“As for the rest... maybe this could work.”

Yasuo timidly picked up some vines that had fallen to the ground when the giant creature had passed through.

“Good, it’s pretty long. While we are separated, each of us can hold one end of this vine.”

“I-Isn’t it too short?”

The vine that Yasuo had picked up was no more than two meters long.

“Well we can find more along the way to add to the length. But when we can’t see each other, we should always be holding this vine. In the forest, our voices will echo and we won’t be able to tell where the sound is coming from. If we make it too long and it frays at knots, that would defeat the purpose, so... I know it’s embarrassing, but I’d rather we don’t move more than five meters away from each other at any time.”

“F-Fine, I’ll try and endure it somehow.”

“That reminds me, Tatewaki-san, do you have anything that can be used to dig a hole?”

“Like a trowel or something? Of course not.”

“Yeah, thought so. Oh well, the ground is soft because of the rain, so we should be fine for a while. Let me look for a broken tree branch or something.”

“Y-Yeah. But why do we need something like that?”

“To bury the poop, of course.”

“Ha!?”

“We definitely have to do that. Things are going to get horrible otherwise.”

Yasuo stressed that dealing with excrement during camping or mountaineering was the most important of manners and rules to follow.

“That thing from earlier might not have been a carnivore, but if medium-sized meat-eaters find the poop of animals that are not predators, they will start stalking us.”

“R-Really?”

“Some animals, like bears, are like that. Besides, leaving it out in the open will disturb the ecosystem. Some animals use poop as a way of marking their territory, so if we leave it out in the open, even herbivores that consider that area to be their territory might turn hostile.”

“F-Fine, fine, I get it, geez... This is the worst. Why the heck do we have to talk about things like this when we’re all alone...”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing! Is there anything else I should watch out for!?”

“Hmm... Let’s see, there’s just one more thing. Neither of us have gloves, so we should try to avoid touching the trees and plants as much as possible. They might have poisonous bugs living in them, and sometimes the plants themselves have poisonous spines.”

“Got it... Haah. Still, Yasu-kun, you seem to be awfully knowledgeable about living in the wild.”

“There’s a video series on YouTube about a middle-aged foreigner guy who is loves to live out in the wild. It’s a lot more interesting than most documentaries. There’s even a book based on his videos that has been published in Japanese, and I’m actually a fan.”

“Ah... I think I heard about some guys in my class talking about that. It’s the

guy who eats things like bugs and snakes with a big grin, right... I don't... like bugs..."

"Of course, I hope we won't have to resort to that as well..... I'd really prefer to not eat the bugs from Ante Lande."

"I don't want to eat the ones from Earth either! I may be the daughter of a pub owner, but I swore that I wouldn't eat soy-preserved locusts^[1] unless the world ran out of every other type of food!"

"I-I see. Well, let's just start moving for now. Quite some time has passed since that thing left. If we lose its trail, we might get lost for real. Let's keep walking."

After saying that, Yasuo pulled out the folding umbrella from inside his luggage.

"H-Hey..."

The umbrella that Yasuo had brought along was a compact-sized version that was just barely enough to protect one person from the rain. The only redeeming feature was its portability.

"It really is just barely adequate, but this thing has its own uses. Right then, let's go. Be careful where you step."

".....Ok, got it."

Kenzaki Yasuo, who was not yet a Hero or Magitech Knight, extended his hand toward Shouko in a completely natural manner.

Tatewaki Shouko, whose left eye was giving off black flames that were a sign of humanity's enemy, also took his hand naturally.

".....Yasu-kun."

"Hmm?"

When they held hands, the flame in Shouko's left eye got smaller for just a moment.

Shouko's eye behind the flame looked bright as she spoke.

"I'm sure you're just as anxious as I am, but... I'm counting on you."

“.....I’ll try my best.”

The fact that he could not bravely say “Leave it to me!” in that situation showed the pitiful side of the Hero’s son.

However, when it came to adventures, the timid people had a better chance of making it out alive.

If anyone was curious about when Kenzaki Yasuo’s 『adventure』 began, the answer would be that it started here, in this moment.

※

The giant creature that Yasuo had arbitrarily named 『scelephant』 had left a rough trail of sorts in its wake, and Yasuo was carefully following its tracks while pulling Shouko along by her hand.

Against the heavy rains that fell in the woodlands, both Yasuo’s compact folding umbrella and Shouko’s emergency waterproof poncho were barely of any use.

Both Yasuo and Shouko had decided to quickly change into clothes that would not stand out, so they were wearing regular sneakers, and shirts and sweatshirts made of thin cloth.

It did not seem to be winter in this region, but their sodden clothes weighed them down and were unpleasantly cold.

“Ah, woah!”

“Yasu-kun!”

Yasuo accidentally stepped into a puddle formed in one of the footsteps of the scelephant, and sank down to his ankle in the mud.

“Ah, geez, this is depressing.”

“Be more careful, okay?”

The two of them smiled wryly at each other, but they still had plenty of stamina left.

“This was probably a good thing. After walking so much, I had started to let my guard down... Oof.”

Yasuo pulled his foot out of the mud with a dull sound.

“How long has it been since we started walking?”

“I dunno, probably an hour and a half, I think.”

Luckily for them, the ground had been fairly even so far.

At the very least, since they were not in a mountainous region with large differences in elevation, they did not need to watch out for avalanches or landslides, and walking up and down hills would be far more tiring than walking on even ground.

Even when they had to relieve themselves, on even ground it was possible to avoid getting into a situation where they lost track of where the other person was, and since they were unable to find any more vines to lengthen the one they already had, they had to go behind a tree that was just barely out of sight from the other person.

“Really... this is just the worst...”

Shouko didn't really want to grumble, but as a person who lived in modern day Japan, she had absolutely no interest in having the experience of relieving herself in the open and moreover having to dispose of the waste herself, unless she was staying at a secured campsite or something.

“How much longer do you want to follow this game trail for?”

“I would like to keep following it until we discover a clue of some sort, or run into an obstacle.”

“Or unless we find a safe place to hide, right, I wonder if Scelephant-kun is really not dangerous.”

“There's no such thing as a wild animal that is not dangerous. By the way, I remember hearing about this in biology class a long time ago, but do you know which mammal in the wild is known for causing the most harm to humans?”

“I remember hearing about that. Hippos, right?”

“Correct.”

The hippopotamus was popular among the Japanese for it's comical and

endearing appearance, but the personality of hippos in the wild could be summed up in a single word: ferocious.

They would not forgive any intruder in their territory, even if it happened to be another hippo.

On land, they could reach speeds of up to forty kilometers per hour. Not only could they also swim fast enough to catch up to mediocre motorboats, they were also capable of crushing intruders in their symbolic jaws or just squashing them using their enormous bodies. It was said that nearly three thousand people were killed each year in Africa by hippo attacks.

Even elephants that were said to like humans and have a gentle personality were starting to become a problem in Southeast Asia, where the number of wild elephant attacks on vehicles and settlements had increased in recent years, and that alone served as a perfect example of why it was better to quickly abandon thoughts such as 『herbivores are harmless』.

“That being the case, I’d rather not get too close, and I think it would be dangerous if there’s a whole herd of those things out there.”

“What are you planning to do if that thing just goes back to its lair or something?”

“.....We would have no choice but to turn back, I guess.”

Yasuo looked back at the game trail that they had been following until now.

“As long as it keeps raining, I think we can run away and avoid being discovered even if we run into a herd of them.”

“I hope we can make it out of the forest before it stops raining.”

“That’s right... But I’d rather find a place where we can sleep safely for a while.”

Feline carnivores like lions and tigers were better at climbing trees than most people would think, and large herbivores like giraffes and wildebeest were very territorial and aggressive.

Moreover, sleeping out in the open in another world where they didn’t have any idea of what the ecosystem was like was tantamount to suicide.

“I get it now, though. I thought that if the weather was clear, we would be able to tell the direction from the sun, and be able to judge the distance once we get out of the forest, but it looks like rain has its uses as well.”

“Distance?”

“Yeah. Even though Ante Lande is a different world, neither Diana-san nor Khalija-san said anything about finding it noticeably easier or harder to move after coming to Japan, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

“So I thought that Ante Lande might be a planet with a mass similar to that of Earth.”

“Planet?”

“What, did you think it was a flat disk supported on the backs of elephants and a turtle?”

“Where did that idea originate from, again?”

“Indian mythology.”

Shouko’s sigh was visible as a white mist, and she wiped the water dripping down her bangs and looked up at the sky.

“I noticed the surroundings slowly getting darker after I met up with you, Yasu-kun. That means that there is a sun in the sky that is moving, right? Or rather, it is the planet that we are standing on that is moving. Moreover, the soil, trees, rain, and gravity feel basically the same as what you would find on Earth, and the differences, if any, are negligible. Which means that we can safely assume that the planet’s diameter, mass, composition, distance from the sun, main components of the atmosphere, and speed of revolution are not very different from the Earth. Actually, it makes me think that this other world might be just one of several dimensions that overlap on top of the planet Earth. Ah, when I say ‘dimension,’ I don’t mean like 3D or 4D, but in the context of parallel worlds, okay?”

“R-Right...”

Although Yasuo said that he understood, in truth he was struggling to keep up

and didn't really get what Shouko was talking about.

"I'm 152 centimeters tall, and my eyesight is probably at around 142 centimeters above the ground. If we assume that the radius of Ante Lande is the same as that of the Earth, which is, umm, about 6370 kilometers... Let's see, it's like this, and this, and that, so... If we were standing at a spot that was close to sea level and could see the horizon, that means that whatever is on the other side of the horizon is hidden by the curvature of the planet, right? So we can conclude that everything around us which is visible must be within 4.5 kilometers from where we are standing."

"U-Umm, why is that?"

"It's a simple application of the Pythagorean theorem. This is like middle school math, you know?"

"Ugh."

For Yasuo, who had decided a long time ago that he would be taking exams for the liberal arts course, this was a phrase that he had not heard for a while.

Of course, even Yasuo remembered that it was a formula by which you could find the length of one of the sides of a right-angled triangle if you knew the lengths of the other two sides.

However, his memories on how exactly to apply that formula had become fairly vague, and besides, there was too much difference in the units used to measure Shouko's height and the radius of the planet, and he had not memorized the value of the Earth's radius in the first place.

"Well, it would depend on the elevation of the area that we are in right now, but even after walking for so long I am not particularly out of breath and my head is clear, so I assume that this place is pretty close to sea level."

Shouko was probably talking about how neither of them were exhibiting signs of altitude sickness.

If they were at a high altitude, then the amount of oxygen carried by the bloodstream to the body would be reduced, which would cause problems in various parts of the body.

“In my case, this thing might be affecting me in some way, but that’s not the same for you, right, Yasu-kun?”

Shouko smiled while pointing to the flames of the Shii in her left eye.

“Besides, it would be nice to know what direction we are traveling in as well.”

“My wristwatch is analog, so can’t we use that find out?”

“Ah, that thing about aligning the short hand with the sun?”

“Yeah, that.”

Yasuo remembered reading in a detective novel that there was a method to tell which way was north without using a magnetic compass, but Shouko shook her head.

“I don’t think it’ll work. We don’t know if we are in the northern hemisphere or the southern hemisphere. If we are in the southern hemisphere, the method to do that is different, you know.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Also, there are very few places where that method will show the true north, because of differences in seasons or latitude. There’s also the method of using the Big Dipper and the Pole Star, but even that depends upon your current location. In the first place, it is necessary for the sun to cross the meridian at noon to use that method, but even in Japan, the further you get from Akashi in the Hyogo Prefecture where the sun accurately crosses the meridian at noon, the more your results will be skewed.”

“Wow, you really know your stuff.”

“I heard about it in Earth Sciences class.”

“Oh, so Sayamazawa high school has Earth sciences courses? Our school doesn’t. When it comes to sciences, at our school we basically have a choice between either Physics or Chemistry, and Biology isn’t given much importance at all.”

“Well, it’s true that a lot of people pick those subjects for their college entrance exams, after all.”

At that point, Yasuo suddenly showed a strange expression.

“.....To think that we would be talking about exams even after coming to another world.”

“Well, we both have college entrance exams this year, after all. Strictly speaking, we shouldn’t have the free time to be worrying about things like Heros or the Shii. Even if you call it a hiking date, I wasn’t looking for this sort of thrill.”

“A hiking date? What the heck.”

“I can’t keep going if I don’t think of it in that way.”

Certainly, the current situation was that they were in another world that they knew nothing about, with no one to rely upon and insufficient preparations, and moreover they were risking their lives to secretly stalk a mysterious giant creature while being stranded in that place.

Despite having said that herself, Shouko suddenly looked embarrassed, and she strengthened her grip on Yasuo’s hand while slightly pressing down on her left eye.

“B-By the way, there’s that thing where people stuck in snowy mountains warm each other up with their body heat, right?”

“Huh!?”

“If you actually tried that, heat would escape from the portions of the bodies that were not in contact with each other and you would immediately get hypothermia, so don’t get any strange ideas, okay?”

“O-Of course I won’t! So you shouldn’t be saying strange things like that as well!”

“You have no right to talk, do you have any idea how many strange things you said to me before bringing me to Ante Lande?”

“Ugh... Umm, that is... Sorry, actually after that...”

“Diana-san got mad at you?”

“.....Looks like you’ve seen through the whole thing.”

“If you ever give me a favourable answer, Yasu-kun, you should know that you will not be able to hide any cheating from me.”

“T-That is...”

Despite the current situation, or perhaps it was exactly because of their current situation.

Yasuo and Shouko were getting heated up while talking about the most commonplace topics.

It was true that they weren't facing any trouble in tracking the scelephant, but more importantly, their own mental states were causing them to act that way.

They were both so anxious that they were desperate to encourage each other and be encouraged in turn by talking about commonplace things.

They had little food, and had no idea how large the forest was.

They were following the trail left by the scelephant because it was easier to walk and there was less chance of encountering danger, but it was possible that they were just headed deeper and deeper into the forest.

The fact that the surroundings were getting progressively darker only served to add to their anxiety.

In a forest at night, where the rain incessantly fell.

That darkness inspired an almost unimaginable level of fear in the two of them who had grown up in a world where every street corner had a lamp post like it was only natural.

The Shii were a different species that originated from darkness existing long before the advent of human civilization.

If light could be considered as a barrier that protected the human world, then this was someplace outside the human world.

And in that sort of place, humans were far too powerless.

When the two of them heard that sound, they stopped moving for the first time.

“Y-Yasu-kun, d-did you hear that?”

Shouko, who had been speaking in a bright and courageous manner until a moment ago, now said that in a trembling voice.

“.....I-It should be fine. It s-s-sounded like it was still far away.”

His reply had no reassurance at all, perhaps because his tongue wasn't working properly.

The sound of howling had reached their ears, through the trees surrounding them and over the sound of the raindrops.

For the people who lived in Japan, the word carnivore brought to mind the feline predators that ruled over the kingdom of the wild animals in jungles and savannas.

Lions, tigers, cheetahs, and leopards were the main representatives of that family.

Next in the list came bears, which had a recorded history of causing harm to humans.

These were animals that could be seen at a safari park or a zoo, and putting it another way, they were just that familiar to most people.

That is why the two of them had forgotten about sources of danger that they wouldn't normally come into contact with.

Wolves.

There was no way for an unarmed person to resist if they were targeted by wolves inside a forest.

Wolves were highly social hunters with strong territorial instincts, and they hunted in packs with a high degree of coordination.

Had they perhaps been walking into the territory of wolves or whatever their equivalent was in this world?

“.....Let's hurry up a bit.”

It was not that they had a plan or any reason to hurry.

However, Shouko wordlessly nodded when Yasuo proposed that, and they started walking faster through the forest in the rain.

They heard the howls a few more times, and their surroundings also kept getting darker.

There was no trace of the leeway that they had earlier on their faces.

The only thing they could do was to desperately follow the trail left by the scelephant, as if they were being chased by something.

By Yasuo's estimate, it was about one hour after they had heard the first howl when the situation changed suddenly.

"The trail is..."

The trail left by the scelephant had suddenly vanished.

They had reached a wide clearing in the forest, due to which the trail left by the scelephant had suddenly disappeared.

However, the forest still continued on all sides of the clearing as far as they could see.

"W-What should we do?"

As if to mock their fears, Shouko's words were immediately followed by more howling.

"The river. Let's get to the river."

Yasuo's quickly made that decision.

"I don't see any other paths we can take. The rain is not so bad that we need to worry about landslides or flooding. As long as we're careful, I think we'll be fine even if we follow the river."

Seeing as there were no other indications on where they should go, Shouko didn't resist his idea either.

Had the scelephant's path angled away from the river more than they had thought?

"I think we should go this way. The sound of running water from the river was always on our left side, after all"

"You're right... but I think we should backtrack a little. The path to move in that direction from here looks a little complicated. Let's go back along the game

trail for a bit and find a place that looks easy to move through.”

“But the wolves... will it be okay?”

“I’m a little worried about that, but that doesn’t make it any easier to get through this place...”

“Can’t you do something about it with magic?”

“As pitiful as it sounds, the answer is no. I can’t use any attack magic. I’ll just keel over from mana depletion. Nodoka has more talent for that sort of thing. Although I seem to have talent when it comes to healing magic and the ability to send off the Shii.”

“That’s pretty amazing too, but I’d rather not fall into a situation where you have to use that power which requires someone to be injured.”

“But if things take a turn for the worse...”

Even if they were hurt, he could heal them. Just that fact alone was a big advantage.

Due to that, the two of them felt a momentary relief from the stress.

““Ugh!!””

However, as if to mock the two of them, the sound of howling could be heard from a spot overwhelmingly closer than before.

Shouko opened her eyes wide from fright, and Yasuo threw away the folding umbrella almost on reflex, grabbed her hand, and started backtracking along the game trail.

However, it was clear that that would not be enough for them to get away safely.

Close on the heels of that first howl, they could suddenly feel multiple presences popping up in their surroundings.

“S-So many!”

Just towards his right hand side that he was currently looking in, he saw more than ten creatures running parallel to them.

They looked similar to wolves, but Yasuo didn’t have any leeway to observe

the specifics.

While moving back along the muddy game trail, Yasuo bitterly cursed his naive judgement.

From the moment they had heard that first howl, they had already become the targets of the predators in this land.

The moment he had lost the trail of the scelephant — which he assumed was a herbivore — he should have been on his guard.

“Yasu-kun!!”

Yasuo was not able to react to Shouko’s voice that was close to a scream.

Two of the creatures that had been running parallel to them had run far ahead, turned around suddenly, and were now running straight towards them.

On the heads of the creatures that came rushing in from both above and below like bullets, there were scales and and a horn that had a metallic sheen.

“Ugh!!”

He tried to activate his magic, but he wouldn’t make it in time.

The situation was completely different from the time when he had destroyed Marfik’s control bangle, and in the first place Yasuo was incapable of any magic that could hit a target at a distance.

Yasuo steeled his resolve and decided to use an electric attack at close range, even if it meant risking his arm getting bitten off. He spread his arms wide to protect Shouko who was behind him, and prepared to confront the creatures that had horns and scales.

“Haaaaaa!!”

In that instant, just as the creatures were about to sink their bared fangs into Yasuo’s flesh, he heard a battle cry from behind him and at the same time, the two creatures were sent flying to the right and left.

“.....Eh”

Yasuo wasn’t able to believe what he was seeing with his own eyes.

“Fuuuuuu....!”

Rough breathing.

Gushing flames.

It was Shouko, with flames gushing out of both eyes, just like when she had saved him from the sandbar in the river.

However, as expected, it wasn't just her eyes.

From both her wrists, both her ankles, and her waist, the flames of the Shii were gushing forth, looking like fashion accessories.

"T-Tatewa—"

"Haaaaaaaaa!"

However, the voice was still Shouko's.

It was certainly not the kind of repulsive voice that had issued from her mouth when she had been completely taken over by the Shii back in Tokorozawa, the kind of voice that had chilled his blood and sent shudders down his spine.

Shouko looked like she was wearing the Shii around her instead of being taken over by it, and boldly rushed towards the pack of creatures that had not stopped attempting to corner them despite being surprised by the unexpected resistance from their prey.

The dirt on the game trail scattered greatly beneath her feet as she ran.

That was a sign of just how much her leg strength had increased, and she used that strength to kick one of the creatures that happened to appear before her up to a terrifying height.

The enemy was also formidable and it spun around once in mid-air, but it still failed the landing and fell heavily onto the soft mud; it didn't get up again.

At that point, the pack of creatures stopped hiding their presences, surrounded Shouko and Yasuo, and started to observe them.

It looked like they were hesitating, thinking about whether they would be able to kill the intruders who had entered their territory or not.

As if to prove that, a number of the creatures bared their fangs and advanced

menacingly towards them while growling.

They had ash-gray fur tinged with green that would allow them to blend into the dark forest, and their heads were covered by a scale-like carapace. They also had a horn on their head.

The scale-like carapace was probably meant to reduce the impact of a hit from the front or the rear, but seeing as how they had attacked with fangs bared, it was not apparent what purpose the horn served.

The question that momentarily flashed through Yasuo's head was immediately answered in the form of a new threat.

A small flame started to gather at the tips of the creatures' horns.

"N-No way..."

That was magic.

Were the wild animals of this world capable of using magic?

Although the flame initially appeared to be small, it seemed to be slowly growing larger at the tip of the horn.

The creatures were attempting to kill them from a distance, perhaps because they judged that they were safe from Shouko as long as they didn't get close to her.

Yasuo had been told that there were methods of defending against attacks from magic and sorcery, but since he could not even produce a satisfactory flame with magic, he had no idea what those methods might be.

A number of flames were turned towards Shouko and Yasuo, resembling nothing so much as will o' wisps which existed to kill living creatures that had lost their way inside the forest.

Shouko's increased strength that could send one of those creatures flying with a single hit obviously came from the Shii's flames, or rather, the change in Shouko's body after she had merged with the Shii.

However, since the flames only covered Shouko's eyes, wrists, and ankles, if the creatures' magical attacks scored a direct hit on her, she would probably not get away unscathed.

It wasn't as simple as just healing her wounds afterwards.

Yasuo still had a slight scar on his side where Khalija's attack had pierced him.

Since they had promised Shouko's parents that her safety was guaranteed on this trip, Yasuo could not allow so much as a hair on her head to be hurt.

Yasuo took a deep breath, steeled his resolve, and prepared to once again jump in front of Shouko to protect her.

"Yasu-kun. Cover your ears."

However, Shouko said that in a soft, yet determined voice.

Yasuo reflexively obeyed her, and in the next instant, he felt like he was about to get blown away.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

Shouko let out a shout.

Yasuo felt like he had been struck by a wall of sound and fell on his backside, and the creatures that were surrounding them backed away while whining.

The trees and plants were shaken violently by the force of that shout, the raindrops that had collected on the branches and leaves were shaken off and cascaded down like a waterfall on their surroundings, and the magical flames that the creatures had been preparing abruptly went out.

"Once more!"

Hearing Shouko once again take a deep breath, Yasuo pressed his hands hard against his ears and prepared his body for the shockwave.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

"Ugh!!"

The impact from the shockwave was too much, even considering that he was hearing it at close range, and Yasuo let out a groan.

Along with reverberating heavily throughout Yasuo's body, the shockwave from Shouko's shout and the air pressure sent a ripple through the dirt at Shouko's feet.

The creatures closest to her were unable to resist, and were blown away.

Seeing that, the creatures that were surrounding them broke formation, turned around, and disappeared into the darkness of the surrounding forest one by one.

Shouko, who had lowered her center of gravity and stood in a stance with her right hand in front of her and her left hand pulled back, stayed in that stance for a while even after the last creature had disappeared.

Yasuo also continued to cover his ears with his hands, and stayed alert for signs of the creatures returning by looking around.

They probably stayed that way for a full three minutes.

Shouko finally relaxed her stance after she heard the howls, which seemed to be trembling slightly, from far away.

“Yasu-kun, are you okay?”

“H-How about you, Tatewaki-san?”

“I... I’m... probably not okay.”

“Eh... Ah!!”

In the next instant, Shouko fell to her knees and was about to fall face down in the dirt.

Yasuo hurried to support her body, and in that instant, most of the black flames were extinguished.

“This is.....”

He wondered if his power that was specialized in healing and sending off the Shii had unconsciously activated and dispelled the flames, but he immediately rejected that.

The 『mysteries』 of Ante Lande could only be activated through force of will.

There was no way that such a convenient reaction could occur spontaneously, and there had to be a proper explanation for that phenomenon.

In the end, the black flames receded until they turned into a small flickering flame in Shouko’s left eye.

Once the flames had receded, Yasuo saw how pale and weak Shouko looked, and once again started to panic.

“My body really hurts. It feels like the toenails on the foot that I used to kick that creature are broken.”

“Ah, I’ll heal you. Tell me where it hurts...”

“Ah... No, it’s okay... It’s not like I’m dying, but I feel like I’ve used up all my strength... I think I’m falling asleep... Sorry...”

“Tatewaki-san!!”

Shouko’s head suddenly dropped while she was still leaning against Yasuo.

Yasuo felt his blood run cold for a second, but after he heard Shouko’s breathing even over the sound of the rain, he felt relieved.

Despite that, it couldn’t really be said that their situation had improved.

Night was getting closer, and the light had faded enough that he already couldn’t see for more than a few meters ahead.

He would not be able to walk very far while carrying the unconscious Shouko, and trying to find the river in the dark during bad weather would be the height of folly.

Even the pack of creatures might attack once again if they realized that Shouko, who was the source of danger, was out of commission.

“Dammit...!”

Not only had Yasuo been protected from the creatures by the unknown power of Shouko and the Shii, he didn’t have a single technique to protect Shouko in return.

He felt foolish for having confidently declared that he would become the Hero, with this kind of ability.

It was only natural that Khalija had been astounded by his lack of ability.

Although Yasuo had said that he understood the situation many times, the truth was that he didn’t understand anything.

He had gotten overconfident, just because he could use some half-baked

healing ability and some ability to send off the Shii.

After experiencing it for himself like this, he finally started to understand what it meant to be 『powerless』.

Whether it was weapons, armor, magic, or comrades, they only had meaning when they were obtained by a person who had become strong after diligently devoting themselves to the basics.

The people who surrounded a powerless person were not comrades, but guardians, and weapons, armor, and magic were nothing more than pointless luggage when carried by a person who could not even defend themselves.

“Shit... Shit...!!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Yasuo noticed the umbrella that he had thrown away at the place where the game trail ended.

He had thought that they had run a fair distance from the pack of creatures that had attacked, but now he saw that they had not moved very far away at all.

“.....”

The reason why Yasuo did not fruitlessly call out to his father or Diana for help in this situation might be because of the last bit of pride that he had left.

Or perhaps it was because of the depth of his despair.

“No way.”

He could see light from a fire slowly closing in on him from deep within the forest.

“Goddammit...!”

Yasuo put Shouko down on the dirt and forced himself to stand on shaking legs as he prepared to face the will o’ wisp.

If there was just one of them... If there was just one of them, he might be able to drive it away by hitting it with his electric attack, even if it meant that he would get taken out at the same time.

The solitary light that continued to get closer glowed like the eye of a Shii, or like the eye of William Bareig, as it seemed to be inviting him into the depths of

hell.

And then.

With a slight sound of splattering mud, the will o' wisp showed its true form in front of Yasuo.

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When Shouko opened her eyes, the first things she noticed was that she had a dull headache, and that there was a ceiling made of wooden planks above her.

“Ugh.....”

When she tried to sit up, she realized that there was a thick and slightly stiff bed sheet beneath the hand that she used to steady herself.

There was a stiff but warm blanket covering her body.

“.....Eh”

It was dark, but it was indoors.

It was a room, protected from the elements by walls and a roof.

When she took a breath and looked around, she saw Yasuo, wrapped in a blanket, sleeping in a chair beside her bed.

“Where... am I?”

When she looked down at her body, she realized that she was wearing a simple one piece hempen dress that she had never seen before.

“Oh, you're awake?”

“...!!”

“I'm sorry, I seem to have surprised you.”



When she turned to look, she realized that a woman holding a lamp that was giving off a yellow light had appeared there at some point.

“U-Umm...”

She was a middle-aged woman, who appeared to be in her fifties.

She was wearing a long robe that looked like something a witch would wear, and her short hair looked like it was silver colored instead of having gone grey with age.

“Be at ease. You are safe here. The beasts from the forest will not come close to this place.”

“D-Did you save me?”

“I didn’t do anything special. I just found the two of you when you were lost in the forest, and brought you here.”

“T-Thank you very much. You saved us. We are.....”

“Don’t worry about it. I only did what was natural. Actually, you were lucky that it was I who found you. If you had been found by ordinary people, I’m sure the situation would have taken a turn or the worse.”

“Eh.....”

Saying that, the woman pointed her finger at Shouko’s eye.

Taking her meaning, Shouko immediately let out a startled cry.

The flames of the Shii were still gushing out of her left eye.

In Ante Lande, the Shii were the enemy of mankind.

If the people of this world found a person who carried the flames that were a symbol of the Shii within their own body, it would not be surprising if that person was lynched on the spot.

However, this woman had not done that. What was the reason for that?

“My name is Catalina Yostern. Have you heard that name before?”

“N-No...”

Seeing Shouko shake her head, the woman gave a wry smile.

“I see. The boy didn’t know who I was either. It’s a pity, I’m actually pretty famous, you know?”

“I-I’m sorry, we are... I mean...”

Shouko was worried that she had hurt that woman’s feelings and started to apologize, but the woman who called herself Catalina cut her off.

“The two of you are from 『Japan』, isn’t that right?”

“.....!”

Shouko was so shocked that she forgot to speak.

That’s right. She had felt that something was strange.

She had not met Catalina before. She was sure of that.

And this place was obviously not on Earth.

Despite that, she had been conversing with Catalina in 『Japanese』.

“Did... he tell you that?”

“Yes, he did. However I knew it the moment I saw his face. Although, it seemed like he was intent on saving you and didn’t find it strange that I was speaking to him in Japanese.”

Catalina looked at Yasuo who was still fast asleep in the chair and smiled.

“I couldn’t believe it. It was the face of a person whom I thought I would never meet again.”

“What do you mean...”

“Can you stand? You must be thirsty. I’m boiling some water right now. Come this way, and be careful not to wake the lad. There are sandals over there.”

Shouko’s headache had faded, so she obediently got out of bed as Catalina asked.

She saw that there was a pair of simple sandals at the foot of the bed, and she put them on.

The adjacent room was larger than the room that Shouko had been sleeping

in, but there were a number of objects in the room that were covered with cloth.

“This place is my private workshop.”

“Are you a painter?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I am. So I would be glad if you are surprised after seeing this.”

Catalina hung the lantern from a hook on the wall, raised her palm towards the ceiling, and created a sphere that gave off a faint light.

Even Shouko was able to understand that it was a magic meant to illuminate the room, but compared to the shock she experienced in the next moment, it was a trivial thing.

There was a single painting hanging on the wall that was illuminated by Catalina’s magic.

It was a portrait of a young swordsman who was holding a beautiful sword.

However, Shouko’s eyes were riveted on the face of that man.

“Yasu-kun... A painting... of Yasu-kun?”

The face of the young swordsman in that painting was definitely Yasuo’s, there was no doubt about it.

“During the war with Demon King Kaul, I went on a journey to convey the situation in various parts of the world to the people through my paintings.”

Catalina spoke while looking up at the painting of the young swordsman who looked like Yasuo.

“I met him at a range of mountains that runs through the Baskelgarde Federation. He was with his companions, in the middle of his journey to save the world that was being consumed by the forces of Demon King Kaul.”

“.....T-That means...”

“Yes.”

Catalina nodded.

“I have met him before. The man whom that boy seems to be an identical replica of.”

There was no need to ask who she was talking about.

“The Hero, Hideo Kenzaki. I think that Erijina Radagast and Alexei Krone might be the only people in the world who remember his features of that boy’s father better than me. The painting of his father that I painted has now been designated as a national treasure of Resteria. Due to that, I became quite famous and I am now able to live a leisurely life like this while pursuing the art of painting that I love.”

The traveling painter, Catalina Yostern.

In the past, she had traveled all over the world, and her painting of the Hero, Hideo, called 『The Hero, Hideo, gazes upon the sunrise at the Sacred Mountain』 that she had painted when she met him in the mountainous region of Baskelgarde was one of the most famous paintings in the world.

Translation Notes:

[1] [Inago no Tsukudani](#) ↑



Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Chapter 3

Interlude – 2

“By the way, Khalija-san, I heard this from Diana-san earlier, but there are paintings of Dad in Resteria, right?”

“That’s right, there are an uncountable number of paintings, from those that are good enough to be designated as national treasures, to those that look like scribblings.”

“Diana-san was saying that Onii-chan looks a lot like Dad when he was younger, but is it the same in the paintings as well? Won’t people immediately realize who Onii-chan is if there are paintings like that spread around the country?”

“I don’t think they are that common... but you’re right. Even I thought that Yasuo resembled him, and moreover, didn’t Major Krone say anything about that to you?”

“No, she did. She said that Onii-chan looked a lot like my Dad from some painting that was a national treasure, it was called the sunrise or something. And besides, I’ve seen photos of my dad when he was younger at my grandparents’ house, and even I thought that he looked so much like Onii-chan that it was almost creepy.”

“That’s a little harsh.”

“But when it comes to paintings, it depends on the skill of the painter, right? And besides, Diana-san is always so soft on Onii-chan and her view of him is distorted by her ‘Respect for the Hero’ filter, so I wondered if the paintings really resembled him that much.”

“I suppose 『The Hero, Hideo, gazes upon the sunrise at the Sacred Mountain』 is loved so much by the people because it is painted very realistically, and the

Krone couple also praised it for being the most faithful reproduction of Hideo and Madoka.”

“Ah, that’s it, that was the title.”

“Oh well, the image of Hideo that most people have built up in their minds and his resemblance that was carved into the numerous lithographs don’t particularly look like him, so I don’t think there is any need to worry about Yasuo’s cover being blown due to the paintings commonly found throughout the city.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right... but now I’m curious to see what those poorly drawn paintings of Dad look like.”

Chapter 3 – The Town of Beginnings

The young swordsman in Catalina’s painting appeared to be the exact likeness of Yasuo, but after looking closely, there were a number of small differences.

The young man in the painting appeared to be wearing something that resembled a gakuran ^[1].

At the Takeoka high school that Yasuo attended, the uniform for boys was the style that had a blazer.

The youth in the painting had shorter hair than Yasuo, and the way the hair was parted was a little old-fashioned.

“Fufufu.”

Catalina laughed upon seeing Shouko blankly staring at the painting.

“He is the Hero Hideo’s son, isn’t he?”

“.....”

Thinking about it rationally, saying that Yasuo was completely unrelated to the young man in the painting would be a little far-fetched.

Also, Shouko was aware of just how dangerous it would be for people to discover that 『The son of the Hero Hideo is in Ante Lande』.

“I don’t... know what you’re talking about.”

Shouko gulped and tried to evade the question, even though she realized herself that it was a poor attempt.

Shouko had let down her guard because this woman had saved them and given her shelter and a bed to sleep in.

Was this elderly woman an enemy, or an ally?

Shouko wasn't worried about whether this lady was an enemy of Resteria, or an enemy of Diana's.

She was worried whether this lady was an adult who was willing to help the two of them, just as they had wished for.

"Where... exactly are we?"

"That's a strange question."

"We only came over from Japan recently."

"Oh, that's quite amazing. How did you get here?"

Shouko did not know of any means of making that trip other than using the Gate Tower.

She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"It's like I said earlier. We just found ourselves in this forest before we knew what was happening."

Hearing Yasuo's voice from behind, Shouko turned around, and what she saw made her break out in a cold sweat.

Yasuo was standing there, with fatigue clearly showing on his face.

"Oh, you're awake?"

"Yes. Sorry, I seem to have fallen asleep at some point."

"It was inevitable, you were so tired, after all."

".....I didn't realize it when I first came here, but this really looks a lot like me, doesn't it?"

"You're right, I thought the same thing as well."

Catalina nodded and continued to speak.

“I never imagined that I would get a chance to meet one of the Hero Hideo Kenzaki’s family members. You said your name was Yasuo, correct? Would you be so kind as to tell me the name of your sweetheart?”

“.....It’s Shouko. Shouko Tatewaki.”

Shouko was not so incapable of reading that situation that she would lose her composure upon being referred to as Yasuo’s sweetheart in a tense situation like this.

Most likely, Yasuo had run into Catalina in the forest, and asked her for help.

However, thinking about it calmly, it was strange for a woman to be walking around alone in a forest filled with such dangerous beasts.

Yasuo had agreed to stay in her house temporarily for Shouko’s sake, but he had not let down his guard.

“The two of us had been living as usual in Japan. We had made plans to go out together. Right, Shouko?”

“Eh!? R-Right...”

However, even Shouko lost her composure for a second when Yasuo easily called her by her first name, something he had been very hesitant to do before. Even so, she managed to nod.

“We planned to have lunch and opened up our bento, and the next thing I knew, we were inside this forest. There was a massive amount of light. We don’t know how we ended up here. Where exactly are we?”

“.....”

“My father’s name is certainly Hideo... But have you met my father in the past?”

Catalina put on a neutral expression and nodded.

“Please wait here for a little while.”

Saying that, she turned around and left the workshop.

“Tatewaki-san.”

“Ha.....”

Yasuo walked forward, pulled Shouko by her hand, and made her stand half a step behind him.

Shouko did not resist, and moved to a spot behind him that would not be unnatural, and continued to look up at the painting, when Catalina came back while carrying a large piece of paper.

“Can you read a map?”

“.....No, I can’t.”

“I see. Well then, look over here.”

Yasuo couldn’t tell if she had noticed his momentary hesitation or not, but Catalina spread out a stiff piece of parchment on one of the tables in the workshop.

“This is the forest that we are in. The cabin we are in is around here.”

The points that Catalina pointed to were almost in the middle of the forest.

There was no way to tell where exactly Yasuo and Shouko had first landed here, but looking at the map it was clear that they had just been heading deeper and deeper into the forest.

“The closest town from here would be this one, Galedeite. Have you heard about it?”

“No, I’ve never heard of such a place.”

The place Catalina was pointing to was located east of the forest.

“Where is the river? When we were in the forest, we saw a fairly large river in the area.”

In reply to Shouko’s question, Catalina traced her finger along the southern part of the forest, where there was nothing written on the map.

“That river is not on this map. This map is quite old. That river was created by Yasuo’s father, thirty years ago.”

“.....”

Yasuo managed to control his suddenly increased heartbeat, and somehow managed to keep a calm expression.

“Created by Dad... Wait, what does that mean? Actually, it’s been bugging me since we first got here, but is this place really not Japan?”

“.....”

Catalina started Yasuo as if trying to gauge his real intentions, but she soon shook her head.

“Didn’t your father tell you anything at all?”

“Tell me about what? My father is just an ordinary salaryman. He works for a company that deals with foodstuffs and makes measurement devices, and I didn’t hear anything about him creating rivers. Nor did I hear anything about him doing something that deserves such a wonderful painting.”

“I see, you really don’t know anything... In that case, I suppose it’s only natural that you are confused.”

“Yeah. And speaking of things we don’t understand, we don’t know what is going on with her eye either.”

Yasuo tried to take a light jab at her regarding the Shii, but Catalina did not show any overt reaction and continued to move things forward.

“In the beginning, I thought she was badly injured, but she insists that she is fine...”

“.....I don’t really know anything about that either, but do you mind if I ask a question?”

“What is it?”

“Before the two of us met, which one of you let out that shout that reverberated throughout the forest?”

Yasuo glanced at Shouko for just an instant, before frowning and replying.

“I think that was me.”

“You?”

“I mean, there were these weird and scary wolf-like things and I screamed my head off for a while, so I’m not sure exactly what point in time you were referring to, Catalina-san. However, I can tell you that I was the only one

screaming.”

“That’s a little pitiful of you, don’t you think? A man should keep his act together and allow his sweetheart to rely on him.”

Hearing Yasuo’s shameful confession, Catalina’s expression finally relaxed.

“In Japan, the girls are quite strong.”

“Yes, I know that.”

Catalina folded the map.

“I’m sure you must be confused after going through a lot of things, but if you’d like, I will escort you to Galedete tomorrow morning. It will be easier to obtain information in a large town compared to wandering around in the forest, and I think that there are a lot of things that you two will be able to gain from that as well.”

“That would be great. Thank you very much.”

Yasuo bowed his head, and Shouko also imitated him.

“The two of you can use that guest room. Be a gentleman and let the lady have the bed, okay? Also, I’m sure that it must be hard to have your date interrupted by such strange events, but save the adolescence for after the situation has calmed down, okay?”

“Eh? Haa... Okay? Umm...”

“.....!!”

Yasuo looked puzzled because he didn’t understand what that last bit meant, and Shouko turned bright red after vaguely understanding it. Seeing that, Catalina had a satisfied expression for some reason.

After that, Catalina brought two cups of hot water, a pitcher, and a candle holder with a new candle to the guest room where Shouko had been sleeping earlier and left after leaving them in the room.

“Fuuu... I was so tense.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Shouko still looked restless while sitting on the bed, but Yasuo pretended not

to notice. He stretched his body and sat down in the chair after picking up the blanket that he had dropped on the floor.

“I wonder what she meant about that adolescence or whatever that she said in the end... Did I hear her wrong?”

“Haa!? You didn’t understand that!?”

“Eh?”

“Ah, yeah, it’s nothing...”

Shouko, who had unintentionally raised her voice, struggled to hold her voice in check.

They had introduced themselves as lovers, and had done their best to convince Catalina that they were just victims from another world who were stranded here and had no idea about anything related to Ante Lande.

In that sort of situation, there was only one sort of gentle warning that elderly people would give to a vigorous young couple when they had to sleep at night in a room with only one bed.

“I mean, boys should be better at picking up that sort of thing... oh, never mind. Knowing Yasu-kun, I guess that’s only natural.”

Due to Yasuo’s reaction, it looked like she was the one who had some strange expectations, which only served to embarrass her even more.

Father, Mother, I’m sorry.

“S-So, what should we do from tomorrow onwards?”

“I suppose there’s nothing for it but to stay under Catalina-san’s care for a while. She seems to know about my father, after all.”

“Ah, right, that is...”

“Besides, she looks like a foreigner no matter how you look at her, but I’m glad she can speak Japanese.”

“Haa... Hmm?”

“In any case, I’m glad we didn’t end up as some wolf’s dinner while being lost. Let’s just go to sleep for today. I have no energy left at all.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Was it just her imagination, or did Yasuo say something strange just now?

“H-Hey, Shouko.”

“.....Eh?”

“Mind if I get into the bed with you?”

“.....Eh?”

Shouko blinked once, and the next second, she turned bright red all the way from her toes to the top of her head.

“Ya, Ya-Ya-Ya-Ya-Ya-Ya.....”

“It’s a little chilly, and I think we’ll be warmer if we stack both blankets and sleep under them together.”

“T-T-T-That’s... T-That’s true, b-but Catalina-san said...”

“It’ll be fine so long as we don’t make too much noise.”

“W-W-W-W-W-W-What happened to you? Did you fall in the forest and hit your head or something!?”

The way he was speaking was quite different from the Kenzaki Yasuo that she knew.

He acted like he hadn’t understood the meaning of Catalina’s teasing earlier, but did he get carried away after introducing her as his girlfriend?

Shouko had gone past blushing and was now at the state where she might start giving off red light at any moment, and she started to panic, but—

“What’s wrong? We do this all the time, don’t we?”

“Eeeeeeeeeeh... Ummmmmm... Yasu-kun wha-wha-what do you intend to do...”

“What’s wrong? I’m not talking about intending to do something, this is what I meant.”

“Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-This? H-H-Hang on, I’m not prepared to...”

In that instant, in that room that was only illuminated by candle light, a new

strong source of blue-tinged light appeared.

“.....Eh?”

It was Yasuo’s Slimphone.

There were some words typed on that familiar blue-tinged screen.

『Your Slimphone battery isn’t dead yet, right? Let’s communicate through text.』

“It’s obvious what I mean, right?”

“.....Eh?”

Beside Shouko who was sitting on the bed and continuously blinking in confusion, Yasuo was sitting so close that they were just barely not touching each other, and continued to input text using his Slimphone’s flick input keyboard.

『I know where we are. But I don’t want Catalina-san to find out the extent of our knowledge. In the unlikely chance that she’s spying on us, I’d like to talk under the blankets so that it doesn’t look strange. I understand that it might make you uncomfortable, but I promise that I won’t do anything strange.』

“Ah.....”

『I’m almost certain that she is eavesdropping on us right now. As far as she is concerned, we are just clueless people who came to Ante Lande from another world, like “Hideo” and “Madoka” did in the past. I want her to assume that we are not thinking too deeply about it.』

“...F-Fine, I d-don’t mind, if that’s what you mean...”

It was true that Shouko was also wary of Catalina, and she understood the dangers that came with being 『The son of the Hero Hideo』.

Shouko was convinced that Yasuo’s request was perfectly justified, and she pulled her Slimphone out of her bag with dull movements and slowly lay down on the bed.

And then, when the bed let out a slight creak after taking Yasuo’s weight as well—

“.....!!”

At this point, Shouko realized that this was still incredibly embarrassing, but it was already too late to back out.

The two of them lay facing each other on the bed that was fairly narrow, while blushing furiously and holding their Slimphones in front of them like shields.

Despite speaking so calmly earlier, Yasuo was also completely red now that they were actually in the bed together, and seeing that, Shouko also got more and more embarrassed.

“Huh?”

“W-What...!”

Yasuo could see that the flame in Shouko’s eye had significantly reduced in size.

Still, the flame didn’t completely go out, so he could see see the red eye of the Shii in the center of the flame.

“.....No, it’s nothing.”

Since it didn’t disappear, there was nothing particularly significant about the fact that it had reduced in size.

Yasuo stopped himself from talking further, and let out a large sigh.

“Hiiii... Hey, Yasu-kun, you’re too close, so don’t let out such a large sigh...”

“A-Ah, sorry... that reminds me, I haven’t brushed my teeth...”

Speaking about such things in whispers, the two of them found it hard to get to the main topic.

“A-Anyways, good night, S-Shouko.”

“R-Right, good night.”

After exchanging a bedtime greeting for the sake of Catalina who might have been eavesdropping, Yasuo pulled the blankets a little higher around them, and that caused Shouko, who was still nervous about each movement he made, to stiffen her body even further.

“.....”

Shouko glanced through upturned eyes at Yasuo, who was desperately avoiding looking at her while typing something on his Slimphone.

『We are currently in a place called the Gaz Commonwealth. The Knights Division of Resteria that Diana belongs to doesn't have any influence here.』

That was the first thing Yasuo showed her on his screen by typing it out.

Seeing Shouko frown, Yasuo flicked his finger on the screen keyboard a few times as if he had anticipated her question, and once again turned it towards her.

『I've heard about a river that my father was said to have created during the fight with the Demon King's army. Apparently, it's called the Hideo Holy Sword River.』

“Pfft.”

Shouko couldn't help letting out a laugh at that ridiculous name which sounded like something any sane person would object to, and then immediately realized what she had done and went back to being alert after looking at the door of the room.

Since everyone in the Kenzaki family, Hideo included, had the same reaction back when Khalija had first come to their house and told this story, Yasuo was not particularly annoyed by her reaction.

『The river is famous and the water is considered to be holy, and there is supposed to be a church near the riverbank. I think it might be in the town that Catalina-san mentioned earlier.』

After Shouko nodded wordlessly, Yasuo once again started typing on his Slimphone.

“.....”

Shouko suddenly realized that she had been intently staring at Yasuo's face from up close while he was busy typing, but turning her gaze away also felt unnatural, so she spent the time until Yasuo finished typing by staring at the back of his Slimphone that was slightly moving back and forth in accordance

with the movement of his fingers over the screen.

『I have no idea how far Resteria is from the Gaz Commonwealth, but I don't think it will be at a distance that the two of us can easily cover on our own. Even if it is a neighboring country.』

Shouko nodded after reading that.

Even if it was a neighboring country, for the two of them who had no means of transportation other than walking, it could not be considered close by any means.

『I think it will be impossible for both Diana and my father to reach out to us without having any hint of our current location. There is no guarantee that the two of them made it to Resteria either. That's why I plan to reach out to this country's Knights' Division sometime soon and reveal myself as the son of the Hero Hideo.』

“!”

Shouko's eyes opened wide.

“There is no other choice.”

After quietly whispering that, Yasuo went back to typing on the phone keyboard.

『Rather than looking for a way to let my father or Diana know that we are here, I think it would be more efficient to let Resteria, and Diana's mother in particular, know where we are. The person that Catalina-san mentioned, Erijina Radagast, is Diana's mother.』

At this point, Shouko started typing on her own Slimphone for the first time.

『In that case, how about asking Catalina-san to reach out to her? It sounded like she knew Diana-san's mother, after all.』

『That's still too dangerous right now. We need to wait at least until we reach the town and find a large organization to look after us.』

『Why is that?』

『There is no guarantee that Catalina-san is on Resteria's side.』

『She said her painting is a national treasure of Resteria, though.』

『Even Khalija-san was a Knight sworn to serve the country. But she still betrayed her country and obeyed the orders from Carnelian. There is no proof that Catalina-san won't do the same.』

Shouko looked like she still wasn't convinced, but Yasuo silently pointed at her left eye.

『Back when I first saw her in the forest, Catalina-san showed some surprise upon seeing your left eye, but she didn't show any trace of fear. I find that to be odd.』

“?”

『In Ante Lande, the Shii are seen as terrifying monsters. It is strange for an ordinary artist to not be afraid of something that can even defeat a Magitech Knight.』

“.....”

『Just like Khalija-san, she might know about the Latch as well. Of course, there is a chance that she was not afraid simply because she is actually an incredibly strong magician despite her age, but I can't let down my guard around her until I know for sure.』

『I see.』

『That is why, from tomorrow onwards, we must appear to be outworlders who know nothing. There are actually more things that we don't know, and half of the things we do know are still surprising even if we have heard about them before, so I don't think there is any reason to get worked up about it.』

『What about your mother? She's famous as well, right?』

“Ah.....”

Yasuo put on a complicated expression for a few moments, but immediately resumed typing.

『Since I said that I didn't know anything about my father's life here, I suppose there is no choice but to say that I only know that my mother is a housewife as well. However, it would be suspicious to try too hard to hide the fact that her

name is Madoka, so we need to tell her that if she asks.』

If Catalina was someone who was interested in how the Hero Hideo's life turned out after the war with Demon King Kaul, she would no doubt ask him 『What kind of person is Hideo's wife?』

Yasuo was supposed to pretend that he didn't know that his mother was considered to be a Great Sage, so he would have to pretend that he thought she was just a regular person and a housewife.

If Catalina brought up the name 『Madoka』 on her own, he would have to act surprised and say that his mother had the same name.

If Catalina asked him what his mother's name was, he would have to reply with 『Madoka』 and then act surprised when she would inevitably tell all about Madoka also being a magician who fought alongside Hideo in Ante Lande.

In any case, if they were going to keep playing dumb, they would need to prepare a large number of lies for when they started talking about Madoka Sugiura, so the sooner they got it over with, the better.

After Yasuo explained that to Shouko, she nodded strongly.

“.....Sounds like a lot of work.”

She unintentionally whispered that aloud.

Deep down, Yasuo also agreed with her.

Would the two of them really be able to pull off such an act?

How far could they go with their makeshift lies, against that artist who gave off a feeling of craftiness and intelligence even when she was silent?

“...In any case, let's get Catalina-san to take us to a large town, and discuss what to do after that once we get there. There's no point talking about that now. Also, let's ask her tomorrow if she can help to hide that eye of yours in some way.”

Since there was no problem even if those words were overheard, he just said them aloud.

The fact was that they had no options except to reach out to either Hideo or

Resteria.

Unlike Hideo and Diana, the two of them did not possess any means to safely escape from danger, so they had no choice but to rely on Catalina even though she seemed suspicious.

“.....Okay.”

Shouko nodded and gripped her own Slimphone with both hands.

『Okay, we should probably go to sleep. I'll sleep on the floor, so...』

He had finished talking about everything that he wanted to discuss.

Yasuo tried to leave the blankets that had become warm from the heat of both their bodies, but he was stopped by Shouko's anxious voice and trembling hand.

“W-Wait, Yasu-kun..... It's fine. Let's just sleep together like this.”

“Eh!?”

Hearing Shouko say that all of a sudden, it was Yasuo's turn to go bright red.

“I-If you do anything strange, I'll give you the same treatment as those wolves from earlier... B-But, you're tired as well, Yasu-kun, so if I was the only one who got to sleep in a bed, I'd feel bad... Umm... I mean...”

Shouko put her slimphone under the pillow and held his hand.

“I want you to hold my hand. Being alone is scary.”

Being stared at directly with her anxiety-filled eyes, Yasuo unconsciously gulped.

“I-I'm embarrassed by this as well, you know... And now you're acting like this despite saying all those things earlier that made me want to die from embarrassment... Ei!”

Growing tired of seeing Yasuo just getting flustered, Shouko pulled him by his hand strongly and dragged him back into the bed.

“If you do anything strange, you'll end up like those wolves in the forest, okay? I'll bash you in the jaw with my knee, okay?”

“Y-You already said that.....!”

“Y-You just have to hold my hand, okay? I mean, we are supposed to be lovers, right? This way is more natural, right? So...”

“I get it. I get it...!”

Despite Yasuo giving in to her demand, just by holding his hand, Shouko could tell that his whole body had become stiff.

Lying side by side on that bed that was by no means large, Yasuo and Shouko maintained a distance from each other where their bodies were just barely not touching, and their hands grew warm as if they were communicating their presence to each other just through their hands.

“.....Ta—”

“.....We’re supposed to be lovers, right?”

“...Sh-Shouko...”

“What’s wrong? You called me so naturally by my name earlier, so I was a little happy...”

“T-That was...”

That was because it was necessary, In other words, it was just an act.

However, if they know the weight of a real sword, they will be able to represent that in their acting and make it look more life-like.

While thinking about acting, Yasuo unconsciously remembered the words said by his classmate, Aioi Aoto, regarding preparing for plays.

If you know what the real thing feels like, it will seem more life-like.

If your acting is accompanied by real-life experience, then it will cease to be acting and will become real.

So what were the real feelings in his heart, seeing as he had been able to call Shouko by her name so easily...?

“I felt that... I had to protect you, Sh-Shouko, so... I was able to call you that.”

Yasuo spoke so softly that his words were unclear even though their faces

were so close to each other, but Shouko heard it perfectly.

“I’m glad. I’d be even more glad if you could call my name without hesitating.”

Shouko looked just a little embarrassed after saying that, and hid her face behind their interlocked hands.

“...I’m sorry, for things ending up this way.”

“It’s not your fault, Yasu-kun. I don’t have any serious injuries, and I am still alive. I’m a little scared, but there is a person who is willing to help us out. And moreover... you’re with me, Yasu-kun. So I’m fine.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Yes, I’m counting on you.”

As Shouko said that with a red face and smiled, the fire of the Shii in her left eye suddenly disappeared.

“Sh-Shouko..... the flame in your eye just.....”

“Yeah. My vision didn’t particularly change or anything, but I thought that might be the case.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure..... Yasu-kun?”

“Hmm?”

“If do anything strange, you get the wolf treatment, okay?”

“How many times are you going to say that...”

Yasuo wasn’t able to say anything more than that.

Shouko pulled him even closer, put her forehead against his chest, and wrapped her arms around his body.

“Good night.”

“.....!”



Yasuo felt every muscle and joint in his body stiffen simultaneously, and he became incapable of moving.

In front of his chest, Shouko's head moved slightly.

Yasuo had absolutely no leeway to realize that she was laughing because she found his situation to be funny.

Even though he had been hugged, he had no idea what to do with his own hands that were currently floating in the air.

Yasuo thought about that until it felt like his brain was going to overheat.

His brain was caught between the questions on whether it was okay to touch her, or whether it was a bad idea to touch her, and then it moved on to a never-ending argument in his own brain about what sort of posture he should take to keep from touching her, or in case it was okay to touch her, what parts were okay to touch.

“.....Suuuuu.....”

“Wait, seriously?”

And then, Yasuo realized that Shouko had fallen asleep without caring about his dilemma.

Yasuo had thought she was just messing around with him, but he could clearly feel that her arms were leaden as they encircled him.

Shouko, who had used the power of the Shii's flames to drive away the pack of beasts, must not have fully recovered from that ordeal.

Her anxiety and mental stress from their exchanges with Catalina earlier must have also reached their peak.

She didn't respond even when he twisted his body a little, so when he tried to push her shoulder a little, she easily rolled away from him and lay on her back.

Even though it was only for a little while, Yasuo could tell that the posture of sleeping on one's side while embracing another person put a lot of strain on the body.

If he left her in that position, there was a chance that she would not recover her strength by morning, and moreover, his mind would not last.

Yasuo slowly moved Shouko's hand that was still on his waist back towards her, and put it in a position that would be comfortable for her to sleep in.

After that, Yasuo tried to get up and sleep on the floor as per his original plan, but Shouko was gripping his hand tightly as if she had seen through that plan of his.

"Ah."

If he tried to forcefully free his hand from her grip, he might wake her up.

After a few seconds, Yasuo gave up and once again lay down next to Shouko.

The space available to Yasuo was fairly small since Shouko was sleeping on her back, but there was nothing he could do about that.

"Haa....."

As he gazed at Shouko's sleeping face from the side, his own eyelids started to get heavier.

Yasuo himself had also accumulated a fair amount of fatigue.

"...I'll do my best."

Yasuo, who found himself in the unprecedented situation of sharing a bed with a girl he knew, was unable to resist the will of his body that cried out for rest, and before long he had fallen into a deep sleep as well.

After that, by the time the candle that the two of them had forgotten to blow out had burned down completely, the door creaked open and Catalina entered the room.

Seeing the boy and girl sleeping on the same bed with barely any distance between them, the artist gave a small smile.

"Right then... Is this a coincidence... or perhaps..."

She looked out of the window.

"Did someone arrange this?"

Was it the wolves' will o' wisps that cut through the darkness far in the distance, in the noisy forest that blended into the darkness of the night?

After glancing at the will o' wisps that cut across the view shown outside the window, Catalina gently stroked Yasuo's hair as he slept, and left the room.

"I suppose I should reach out to that person, just in case."

※

The next morning, Yasuo and Shouko, who gratefully ate a breakfast consisting of some fairly sour bread and tea made from beans that grew in the forest, were unable to look each other in the eye other for some reason.

They had experienced an embarrassing moment when they accidentally looked into each other's eyes after waking up... It was not like that. In actuality, both of them had forgotten about falling asleep in close proximity to each other, and when they woke up they simultaneously pulled back from each other on top of the small bed, and as a result, both of them had ended up falling out of bed.

The sound was loud enough to startle Catalina and cause her to come running to see what had happened, and the two of them found themselves in an indescribably awkward situation.

Incidentally, the black flame had returned to Shouko's left eye at some point.

"It must be nice to be young."

Moreover, the situation was basically equivalent to admitting that they had slept in the same bed, so the fact that Catalina had some strange misunderstanding was reflected in her words.

After the two of them underwent the baptism of using an outhouse in this other world, Catalina urged them to prepare for their departure.

After giving both of them well-used greatcoats that had attached hoods, Shouko was given two things that closely resembled cushions used to correct seating posture.

"Here, carry these."

As for Yasuo, he was given a large sack that was packed full of something,

although it wasn't all that heavy.

Catalina herself was holding one of each in each hand.

"What are these?"

"The bags contain some things that we can exchange for money in the town. They are important merchandise so don't drop them, okay?"

Yasuo understood what she was saying. Since they were going to be staying under her care, being given such tasks to do made him feel better as well.

He had still not let down his guard, but as long as they were both behaving amicably towards each other, it would be better to follow the social niceties.

"As for what Shouko is carrying, we will be using them soon."

Catalina smiled mischievously and gestured for both of them to step outside.

"Uwaah, we were in this kind of place?"

Shouko saw Catalina's workshop from the outside for the first time.

Shouko had imagined that it was a log house with a gabled roof, but it actually looked like a solid fortress-like structure that had been built around a cave and reinforced with some material that looked a lot like concrete.

There was a strangely large space cleared around the workshop, but it did not look like it was meant for a garden or fields, as the soil had been compacted until it was fairly flat and the area was almost devoid of even weeds.

"Even I thought it was a factory or fortress when we brought you here."

Yasuo guessed what Shouko was thinking and said that.

"I would have preferred a more charming exterior myself, but that's not possible in this forest."

Saying that, Catalina pulled out a silver-colored tube and put it in her mouth.

A whistle that sounded more shrill than the one used for soccer games penetrated the trees of the forest and echoed around them.

And then, they waited for about ten seconds.

Suddenly, their surroundings were filled with a flurry of wind, and Shouko

inadvertently looked up and saw something that caused her to widen her eyes.

“Yasu-kun! That is—!”

“That thing is—!!”

An incredibly giant creature slowly descended from the sky while flapping what looked like wings, and settled down on the ground near the three of them.

It was without a doubt the 『scelephant』 that Yasuo and Shouko had been following in the forest.

The reason why the game trail had suddenly come to an end was because the scelephant was capable of flying.

However, it was hard to believe that something so massive could fly through the air by flapping its wings.

Seen from the front, the face of the scelephant looked more like that of a round rhinoceros than an elephant.

The scaled elephant, or rather, the scaled rhinoceros that had calmly landed in front of the three of them lay down flat on top of the compacted soil.

“This is a scaled dragon. We will ride to the town on its back.”

Despite the fact that it had such a rotund body, it was apparently neither an elephant nor a rhino, but a dragon instead.

“This forest is the habitat of scaled dragons, so they occasionally land on top of my workhouse.”

If such large creatures were in the habit of landing on top of the house, then it certainly made sense to reinforce the house to that extent; if not, the people who lived inside would find it intolerable.

Most likely, the strangely compacted soil around the house was also due to these things.

“I-Is it really okay to ride on top of this?”

“Despite their appearance, they are actually quite placid creatures. A scaled dragon of this size can carry six adults. I’ll climb up first so throw the chairs to

me, okay?”

Catalina climbed up scaled dragon’s back in a practiced manner, using its leg and shoulder as handholds, and then proceeded to attach those things that looked like tatami chairs used to correct seating posture on top of the scales on its back.

So those things were basically saddles used to ride on top scaled dragons.

“It’ll take around three hours to reach Galedelite, riding on this one’s back.”

“Is it going to fly while carrying us?”

“Of course not. If we did something like that, we would get shot down by the Anti-flight Sorcery Division stationed on the town walls. We will be moving on the ground at a sedate pace.”

“Anti-flight Sorcery Division?”

Shouko, who had truly not heard that term before, asked for an explanation of that term, and hearing that, Catalina’s expression turned slightly pensive.

“.....It looks like you’ll need to learn a few things. We have plenty of time, so I’ll explain on the way. Come now, hurry and climb up here.”

After that, Yasuo and Shouko climbed up on the back of the scaled dragon, taking almost five times as long as Catalina did.

When the scaled dragon stood up, their vision was suddenly elevated, and, both Yasuo and Shouko let out a shout of joy.

“Amazing!!”

“Uwaah! We’re so high up!”

“I didn’t think you would find it so entertaining. Yasuo, be careful to not drop the sack.”

After giving a wry smile, Catalina once again blew on the small pipe and the scaled dragon started to move.

The movement itself seemed relaxed, but because of its giant body the length of each stride was massive and the trees in the forest that they had taken so much effort to walk past yesterday started to go by in a blur.

The weather was not clear today either, but the rain had stopped, and there were brief periods where the sunlight broke through the clouds.

Their view was also clear, and they saw some massive ferns and trees with bright blue fruit, which served to further reinforce their thoughts that this place was very different from Japan.

During their trip through the forest, Catalina gave Yasuo and Shouko a lecture on the basic facts about the world called Ante Lande.

“I suppose I should start with the war against Demon King Kaul, thirty years ago. That’s when your father and his companions defeated the swarms of demons that appeared from the land beneath the Grand Duchy of Torjesso.”

She didn’t mention anything about what happened thirty years ago, save that the demons had been defeated by the hero from another world, Hideo. Yasuo did not get the chance to bring up the topic of his mother during this time.

Regarding the Shii, what she said was basically a rehash of what they had already heard from Diana and Khalija.

However there were a few pieces of information that they had not heard from Diana, who was a citizen of Resteria. Namely, the current position of the Gaz Commonwealth, and what kind of impression the people of the Gaz Commonwealth had about the Hero, Hideo.

The Gaz Commonwealth was located between Resteria, which was one of the major world powers, and the Baskelgarde Federation, and was apparently under constant political pressure from both of them.

The Commonwealth was a republic, but due to that there was no single authority within their borders who held absolute power, and the people who lived there were split among the pro-Resteria and pro-Baskelgarde camps.

The Gaz Commonwealth was also the place where the most battles involving the Hero Hideo took place during the war against Demon King Kaul.

Due to that, the tendency of the people from the Gaz Commonwealth to view Hideo as a Hero was just as high, if not more than the people of Resteria, but on the other hand, it was also a fact that the Gaz Commonwealth was the area with the largest number of war casualties.

There were a lot of people who blamed that on the fact that both Resteria and Baskelgarde had used the Gaz Commonwealth as a breakwater, and while they still celebrated the actions of the Hero Hideo, they felt resentment towards Resteria and Baskelgarde for making use of them and forcing them to take unnecessary casualties.

It had only been thirty years since the war against Demon King Kaul.

There were still a lot of people around who remembered the wartime, and faced with the modern day Shii crisis, it was said that in the background, the political situation of the nation was slowly but surely starting to come apart at the seams.

“Thanks to the fact that this nation is sandwiched between two major powers that it is on friendly terms with, there is no overt loss of public order as of yet. The Knights Division, which has not forgotten the lessons learned during the wartime, is powerful. As are the Magitech Knights, who currently hold the most power as of now. However, if something were to happen that greatly shifted the balance, if the Magitech Knights were to to be divided for some reason, this country would be in dire straits. The war refugees who were unable to find protection in Resteria and Baskelgarde also aimed to settle in the Gaz Commonwealth for the time being.”

“That sounds... quite troublesome. By the way, how large is this country, approximately?”

“It’s not very big. It is wholly incomparable to the size of Baskelgarde, and even comparing it to Resteria, it is probably around half the size. However, thanks to the fact that it has been an important trading point since ancient times, this country’s financial position is quite good. Due to that, this country has a long history of being a republic. Do you know what ‘republic’ means? Although, I seem to remember hearing that Japan is a republic as well.”

“Umm... It’s actually a little different, but I guess you could say there are some similarities.”

While it was certainly true that the country of Japan had some things in common with a republic, such as being based upon democratic principles wherein the power rested with the people and the elected representatives of

the people were responsible for the administration of the country, Japan was actually a constitutional monarchy due to the fact that they had an Emperor.

Also, since a democracy and a republic were not the same thing, there were cases where a nation claimed to be a republic while belonging to a federation of states, and there were also cases where a republic had a crowned ruler.

“Is there a head of the state? I think that many things would depend on which faction that person belongs to.”

“I’m not sure how to put it in your terms. Let’s see, umm... pres.... President? The President claims to be neutral, but for all intents and purposes, he is on Resteria’s side.”

When it came to finding countermeasures against the Shii, even Resteria had a divided opinion on whether to invite the Hero Hideo to their country or not.

No doubt, countries that did not possess a cheating technique like summoning a Hero would find themselves in even deeper chaos.

“Once we get close to the town, Shouko, pull the hood down low over your eyes, okay? Since you’re accompanying me, I don’t think they will pry too deeply into your identities as long as we play a slightly higher entry toll, but there’s no disadvantage in being a little cautious.”

“Understood.”

Due to the current situation in which fear of the Shii was rampant, if a girl were to appear while bearing the flames of the Shii in her eyes, it would no doubt cause a panic.

After resting for one night, Shouko’s left eye was once again alight with a black, smoldering flame.

The flame did not burn anything that was brought close to it, but they were not able to cover it up even by wrapping a bandage around her eye, so there was no choice but to hide it from others by wearing a hood low over her eyes.

“.....That reminds me.”

William had also said that his red eye was the one thing he could not conceal, did William perchance have the same nature as Shouko?

“What’s wrong, Yasu-kun?”

“.....No, it’s nothing.”

“If you’re worried about the flame, I don’t think anyone will notice as long as they don’t get right up in my face...”

“Eh?”

Shouko said something different from what Yasuo had been thinking about, but then she took off her hood, and after hesitating for just a moment, with a small shout to pump herself up, Shouko grabbed Yasuo’s hand while he sat beside her.

“.....Ei.”

“Eh.”

When she did that, the black flames that were flickering in the wind and were big enough to reach from her forehead to her bangs suddenly reduced to the size of a cigarette lighter flame.

“Oh, my...”

Catalina looked at Shouko’s eye and the sight of them holding hands, and, she looked at Yasuo with a gaze full of some hidden meaning.

“Oh my, oh my...”

“W-What is it!?”

Yasuo shouted towards her with a red face, but on the other hand he didn’t have the option of shaking off Shouko’s hand either. Meanwhile Shouko was being herself and her face was certainly a little red, but she looked like she was actually enjoying herself, so Yasuo had no idea what he should do.

“.....Hehe.”

He didn’t know the logic behind it, but it appeared that the flames of Shii grew smaller the closer Shouko was to Yasuo.

In order to erase them completely, they would have to do something like last night.....

“It’s nice that the two of you get along so well.”

“Please don’t make fun of us!”

“Yeah... but doesn’t this make it look like I’m really important to you or something?”

“And you too, what the heck are you saying?”

Yasuo found himself being steadily cornered into a situation that he could not endure, and both Shouko and Catalina gave contended smiles and turned to face forward once more.

“In any case, this should do the trick, right?”

“Well, yes, but you still shouldn’t let down your guard. The damage in Galedeite has been relatively minor, but speaking of the Gaz area as a whole, the threat from the Shii is fairly serious, after all. Due to that, there are a lot of people saying that they don’t want to be used as pawns by the major powers once again, like during the war with Demon King Kaul. Because of that, there is a faction that wants to maintain a state of true independence, and they are gaining a lot of popularity.”

It might not be at the level where it could be called nationalism, but precisely because this country was a republic, it was possible for such factions to suddenly gain power.

In some ways, that was an extremely natural thing, and something that could normally be ignored as it was part of the politics of a country they were not affiliated with.

More importantly, the warmth and softness of Shouko’s hand that he was feeling with his own would normally pose a bigger problem for Yasuo.

“The faction that came up with the plan to obtain a stable form of independence were originally an organization that took care of displaced war refugees, called Carnelian of the Coal Mine.....”

““!””

That is, if not for the fact that Catalina mentioned the name Carnelian of the Coal Mine.

“Ooh!”

The field of view suddenly got larger, and Shouko let out a shout of joy.

As soon as they left the forest, the three of them were greeted by the sight of a large, open plain, and although it was still quite far away, they saw something that looked like a citadel as well.

“Is that Galedeite?”

“That’s right. It’s the greatest fortress town in the Gaz Commonwealth. There is a cathedral belonging to the Church of the Divine King here where people worship the Hideo Holy Sword River, so this place is an important town in the Gaz Commonwealth, speaking from a religious perspective as well.”

The Church of the Diving King.

Yasuo had heard a little about that organization from Khalija.

He had heard that it was an organization that had a long history of both good and evil deeds, just like its counterpart on Earth, and it was hence a “holy place where wicked men gathered.” However, in the eyes of the general public, it probably served perfectly as the foundation for their daily prayers.

That aside, he couldn’t seem to get used to the name “Hideo Holy Sword River,” no matter how many times he heard it, but encountering the name of his father in this fashion after being separated from him gave him a very strange feeling.

“Yasuo, you should hide your face as well, just in case. I don’t think there are many people who know what Hideo looked like, but there might be a few people who remember.”

“I understand.”

Since their view had improved after leaving the forest, they could see things here and there that resembled wagons, slowly moving towards the fortress town.

Yasuo and Shouko decided that it would be better to stay alert from on onwards, and put on the hoods that were attached to their greatcoats.

Certainly, both of them were tense.

However, despite that, they weren’t able to suppress their anticipation.

To put it shortly, going to another world meant interacting with a new society.

It was a society that was not constrained by their own set of values and common sense.

Before long, they had stabled the scaled dragon outside the city walls in a stable meant for that purpose, passed through the gate without any issues in particular, and Yasuo and Shouko beheld the town of Galedite in the other world for the first time.

“It kind of... doesn’t feel like a town at all.”

It was a town with a lot of shadows.

Catalina widened her eyes at Shouko’s whispered statement.

“You can tell?”

“Well, it’s just a vague feeling. The whole place seems really dark, as if there’s not enough sunlight.”

Compared to the sunny plain they had crossed after leaving the forest, it felt like they had entered a man-made forest this time.

The buildings were tall, the alleyways looked complicated, and there weren’t many people out walking on the streets.

Unlike the back alleys of Japan, even the entrance and exits of alleys here appeared to be perpetually shrouded in darkness.

However, the town did not appear to be dirty or dilapidated.

The alleys did not appear to be overflowing with garbage or have graffiti on the walls, and nor did they appear to be a gathering place of people who might be difficult to approach.

In any case, both Yasuo and Shouko instinctively felt that this place was completely different from any 『town』 that they knew.

“That’s right, we still have some time, so would you like to go sightseeing?”

““Sightseeing?””

Both Yasuo and Shouko looked surprised on hearing that word.

“Shouko. Don’t raise your head like that, even if you are surprised. No matter how small it is, the Shii’s flame will still attract attention.”

“Ah, s-sorry.”

Shouko panicked and pulled the hood even lower.

The flame had reduced in size somewhat because she was walking close to Yasuo, but the two of them could not very well walk around town while constantly holding hands.

She had to stay alert at all times.

“Remember all the things I told you about this country on our way here? I think you’ll understand why you felt uncomfortable about this place after we do a little sightseeing and see what this town is famous for, Shouko. Both of you, follow me.”

Saying that, Catalina stated walking ahead of them.

“This place is a fortress town, and during the war against Demon King Kaul, this place served as the de facto front line for this area. Also, this town is an important hub for travelers. That’s the reason why this town ended up in this way. To begin with, let’s go over there.”

What Catalina pointed at after saying that was the tallest tower in their surroundings.

“Uwaaaah!!”

Just how many times had she let out shouts of amazement since coming to this world?

Shouko, who was standing on the edge of the terrace, was struck with amazement after seeing the magnificent view that filled her whole vision, something no artist could ever hope to reproduce.

The tower was made of stone, and was approximately fifty meters tall.

The terrace on the topmost floor of that tower offered an unbroken view of Galedelite’s surroundings, and so it served as a viewing platform open to the public as well as a watchtower.

Although they had left their luggage at a guard station on the first floor,

climbing the steep stone steps was quite a challenge for Yasuo, as he was a boy from the modern age who was used to things like escalators and elevators. However, the view from the top most floor immediately made him forget about his fatigue.

“A-Amazing...”

If you consider just the height of the tower, it was not something Yasuo and Shouko, who lived in a modern city close to the capital, found particularly astonishing.

However, the sheer width and depth of the view was something that people who lived in modern Japan would probably never see.

The view of the town of Galedeite below their feet was also marvelous, but what amazed the two of them the most was the vast amount of nature that surrounded the town.

Their attention was wholly occupied by the forest, the plains, the mountains in the far-off distance, and the sky.

The view from the top of the famous viewing platforms in Japan is one of an endless expanse of cities and towns, punctuated by scenic mountains.

However, from this viewing platform, the boundary between the sky and the ground was clearly visible.

“Amazing, amazing, amazing!!”

As soon as Shouko reached the topmost floor of that tower, she became incapable of saying anything except that, and the fact was that the view had such a big impact on the two of them that there was nothing else to say.

“That forest is the same one you live in, right, Catalina-san?”

Catalina nodded when Yasuo pointed his finger towards it and asked that.

“Yes. Also, you can see it from here, right? That river that is cutting through the forest and flowing into the western side of the town is the one that your father created towards the end of the battle with the Demon King, the 『Hideo Holy Sword River』.”

“Really, can’t something be done about that name?”

“There’s no point saying that to me.”

Seeing it from above, Yasuo could tell that the Hideo Holy Sword River was very wide and long.

His father had said something about the river being created due to the demon’s attacks in the middle of the battle, but it seemed to originate from a lot further away than the phrase “flash food” would imply.

The river appeared to originate far away, in the slightly hazy mountains that were on the far side of the forest that the two of them had spent so much time wandering through yesterday.

If this river had not existed thirty years ago, just how wide-scale and bizarre must have the battle between his father and the demons been in order to create it?

If you had to replicate the same thing with a modern weapon from Earth, there was no doubt that it would have to be something off the charts.

“I think it should be clear after seeing this, but there is nothing in the vicinity of this town that would hinder an invading army. Once the enemy gets over those mountains far, far away, they just need to travel in a straight line to get here. And to the rear of the town is just a vast, open plain that is open to traffic from both Resteria and Baskelgarde. That’s why this town of Galedeite ended up in this form, like a turtle that has retreated into its shell.”

The reason why the town looked so dark was because it was fated to serve as a stronghold in times of emergency.

The town walls were tall, the buildings were crowded close to each other, and the alleys were narrow and complicated in order to confuse invaders.

Even long before the war with Demon King Kaul, this town must have weathered many attacks due to its nature as an important checkpoint for traffic and an economic center.

“My destination is a little difficult to see from here; it’s that market over there. The sacks that Yasuo left in the guard room earlier contain the same dried beans that were used to make the tea you drank this morning. As for your destination..... considering the situation, I suppose it would be over there.”

The place Catalina was pointing to was on the opposite side of the town from the market, and the viewing platform was located almost exactly in between the two. It was a building that was almost the same height as the viewing platform.

Unlike the other buildings in the town that were crowded together, this building had a fair amount of empty space around it.

“What is that place?”

Catalina answered Yasuo’s question nonchalantly.

“It’s the Galedeite headquarters of the Gaz Knights Division. If they learn that you are a family member of the Hero Hideo, they will likely give you a warm welcome and offer you their protection.”

“I”

Yasuo unconsciously gulped.

No matter how much he tried to control it, his body would stiffen every time she mentioned the name of his father; Yasuo wondered if she had seen through that.

Yasuo asked Catalina a question, as if to cover that up.

“Catalina-san. What kind of social position do the Knights have in this country?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you look at the word ‘Knight’ in Japanese, it basically refers to a soldier who fights from horseback, someone more extravagant than a foot soldier. However in reality they tend to be more than that, so...”

Yasuo felt annoyed that he wasn’t able to properly put it into words, but Shouko seemed to understand what he meant and continued from where he had stopped.

“The social position that accompanied the title of 『Knight』 in the world we came from differed greatly depending on the country and the era. I think what Yasu-kun is asking about is if they are akin to feudal lords who rule over a demesne, or if the title is honorary and given to people who are recognized by a

ruler, or if they are career soldiers.”

Catalina seemed to understand after hearing what Shouko said.

“In this country, 『Knight』 is the name of a profession, and the post does not imply any special social position or nobility. The Knights Division Headquarters in the capital city of the commonwealth oversees the activities of all the Knights, and in essence, all the 『Knights』 are actually 『Magitech Knights』. Their work consists of maintaining public order and defending the territory. Does that answer your question?”

“Ah, yes. Thank you very much.”

In other words, if they sought protection at that place called the Galedeite Headquarters, they would not need to worry about being imprisoned by some local noble who was a Knight in name only.

While he was thinking about that, he made eye contact with Catalina, who had a serious expression on her face.

“The two of you have had some fairly high standard of schooling, correct?”

“Excuse me?”

“During the short time it took for us to come here from the forest, I understood that the two of you possess fairly good knowledge about history, politics, mathematics, and economics.”

“R-Really?”

“When I was talking to you about this country, neither of you asked me to clarify what a particular word meant, even once. For example, even many of the people who live in this country do not know what the word 『republic』 means.”

Wasn't she rating them too highly?

At the very least, neither Yasuo nor Shouko thought that their knowledge was particularly extensive, and any liberal arts student who took their exam preparations seriously or a student aiming to get into a national university would be able to follow a conversation of that level.

When they meekly told her the same thing, Catalina looked amazed and slumped her shoulders.

“The fact that you can say that that is normal proves what an extraordinary place the other world is. There must be children like you all over the place, right?”

““ ””

Yasuo and Shouko unconsciously looked at each other.

From their perspective, both Catalina and the town of Galedite were worthy of admiration, due to their otherworld nature.

People here could use magic as if it was the most natural thing in the world, could fly through the air, and had trained fantastic creatures to work for them.

Why would people of this world who could do such amazing things ever see Japan as a threat?

Catalina seemed to have guessed what the two of them were thinking about.

“Even if you search the length and breadth of Ante Lande, you won’t find a single country where every child is able to go to school and receive an education. Do the two of you think that all the people in Ante Lande are capable of using sorcery or magic?”

Yes, they had been thinking that.

Yasuo discovered that he had developed that misapprehension in some corner of his heart, and he was shocked.

“In Ante Lande, the number of people who can use magic, become Magitech Knights, or even go to school and receive an education are limited to a select few. You can say that ever since the war with Demon King Kaul, that trend has increased even more... This is a good opportunity, so there’s one more place I want you to see before we go to the market. Although it might be a little too depressing to be called sightseeing.”

Saying that, Catalina started to climb down from the tower.

“W-Where are we going?”

“To see a scar from thirty years ago.”

Catalina’s answer was concise.



“T-This place is...”

Among all the buildings that lined the streets, that building in particular looked conspicuously old and run down.

From the outside, it appeared to be a church or a chapel, and in this town filled with tall structures, it was one of the rare buildings that was only two storeys tall.

They saw something that looked like a courtyard after passing through the rusted gates, but the ground was mostly bare with just a single seedy-looking tree growing on it. Overall, it made for an appearance that was not particularly inviting.

Catalina pointed towards what looked like a nameplate that had been nailed perfunctorily to the wall that surrounded the building.

“It says 『House of the Fireflies』. Do you know what sort of insects fireflies are?”

“Well, of course.....”

“Since the insects are luminescent and there is no danger of them sparking off a fire or explosion, they are often used as a light source in deep coal mines.”

“Oh, I see...”

Didn’t Catalina mention a strange word just now?

“Of course, the light given off by fireflies is fairly useless. However, for the people who work in coal mines, that feeble light is enough for them to trust their lives to it. This is that kind of place.”

Yasuo unconsciously put himself on guard.

It was almost purely on reflex.

Catalina just clearly mentioned the word 『coal mine』.

“This is one of the facilities managed by the Carnelian of the Coal Mine, the organization that works to assist displaced refugees.”

“...!!”

He went stiff and felt a chill run through his heart.

The wariness he had kept bottled up within himself until now suddenly rose up and forced his heart to beat faster.

Catalina's intelligent eyes were looking sideways at Yasuo who was drenched in a cold sweat.

What exactly was it that lurked deep within her eyes?

Had Catalina guessed that Shouko was the 『Latch』 as he had suspected, and brought her here to hand her over to the Carnelian of the Coal Mine?

Could he take Shouko and escape from Catalina, who appeared to be capable of using magic?

Just before Yasuo's panicked thoughts were about to explode...

“...!?”

A shrill bell sounded within the 『House of the Fireflies』, and Yasuo, Shouko, and even Catalina unconsciously looked in that direction.

The next instant.

“*****!!”

Where exactly had they been hiding?

A large number of children suddenly appeared from the various alleyways and ran towards the 『House of the Fireflies』 each one fighting to be the first one there.

“Eh!? Eh!?”

“Uwaaaah!”

The children who darted past their legs all looked shabby and underfed.

However, they had a sharp and shrewd look in their eyes.

“Who were those kids...?”

Instead of replying, Catalina just pointed in a certain direction.

The children were sitting in a circle around that seedy-looking tree.

While Yasuo was wondering what they were doing, an adult person appeared from within the 『House of the Fireflies』.

It was an old woman who was wearing a long and threadbare robe.

The woman had a basket hanging from one arm with bread that looked similar to what they had received from Catalina that morning, and the children were all staring directly at that basket of bread.

One of the children tried to stretch out a hand towards that basket when the old woman was not looking.

“**!”

“Ah!”

Shouko unconsciously let out a small shout.

The old woman kicked backwards at that child without even looking.

The child who had been kicked fell flat on the ground, but didn't cry, and instead just directed a sulky look at the old woman.

On the other hand, the old woman seemed to have good hearing as she heard Shouko's exclamation, and she appeared to glare in their direction for a second from under her hood.

Seeing that, Catalina bowed towards her.

“.....”

The old woman appeared to notice Catalina as well, and she slightly raised her heavily wrinkled eyelids, but she immediately turned back towards the children and started to say something to them.

Yasuo could not understand a word of what the old lady was saying.

It was probably the language used by the people of this region.

Even though he could not understand the language, he could tell that her voice was not gentle by any measure.

However, the children appeared to still listen to her attentively, and after a few minutes, she distributed the bread among them, one loaf per child.

Of course, the child who had been kicked earlier also got a share.

After the old woman finished distributing the bread among the children, she moved toward a corner of the courtyard.

There was a well with a hand pump mechanism over there.

The old woman said something to one of the children who appeared to be older than the other children in the group.

The child she had spoken to finished eating their share, licked their hands as if unwilling to let a single crumb go to waste, and went over to the pump and started to move the handle up and down.

Before long, water began to flow out of the mouth of the pump, and the children who had finished eating their bread rushed towards the pump, fighting to be the first one there, and drank the water while spilling it on themselves.

Only after all that had happened did the old woman properly turn towards Catalina, and walked over in their direction with slow steps.

“.....”

Yasuo had started to feel very tense after hearing the name “Carnelian of the Coal Mine,” but the sight he saw before him differed greatly from what he had imagined.

No, perhaps this was the original nature of the organization.....

“****, Catalina!?”

The old woman who eventually came to stand in front of them asked Catalina something, in a voice that was close to a shout.

“****”

Catalina also replied to the old woman in the same language that Yasuo and Shouko could not understand.

The two of them just waited while being tense and watched the conversation, and eventually the old woman turned to look at Yasuo and spoke.

“I see. I knew it the moment I saw him.”

“Yes.”

“You are Hideo’s son, aren’t you?”

Her voice had some strange inflections, but she was still speaking clear Japanese.

What’s more, she declared that he was 『Hideo’s son』 without any doubt.

Yasuo’s panic born from suspicion once again flared up, but the old woman just sighed once and looked away from him.

“Hideo’s son has come here from the other world. I wonder if war is going to break out again. That would be bad. We’re already living on scraps as it is.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“Haa? Isn’t that obvious? The Hero, Hideo, was brought here by God because no human could stand up against the Demon King Kaul. And what is it exactly that is threatening to throw the world into chaos right now? It’s the Shii, right? It is obvious that God has summoned you here because, once again, the people of Ante Lande cannot hope to win on their own.”

It looked like this woman was fairly strange.

The old woman seemed to have a dangerous personality, but despite the fact that she had declared that he was 『Hideo’s son』, she did not raise a fuss about it, and despite the fact that she was living in a facility run by the Carnelian of the Coal Mine, she did not attempt to hide her hatred of the Shii.

This was an attitude that was wholly incompatible with what he had heard regarding people affiliated to the Carnelian of the Coal Mine, based on the information he had heard from Khalija.

Yasuo, who was completely lost, looked towards Catalina, but she just spoke to the old woman in Japanese without even sparing him a glance.

“Are things really that bad?”

“It’s been thirty years since then, of course the support will dry up.”

The old woman answered the question with a twisted expression, turned back towards the 『House of the Fireflies』, and looked at the children who had filled buckets with water and had started washing their clothes.

“The House of the Fireflies that once took care of two hundred people is now struggling to even feed a bunch of brats like them.”

“.....Umm, those children, just who are...”

Shouko, who had been silently observing the situation until now, muttered that question, and the old woman gave a concise answer.

“They are orphans.”

“Eh.....”

Shouko was unable to say another word at the weight of the truth contained in that short answer.

“They all have different circumstances. There are some children who were abandoned, and some whose parents died for whatever reason and they had no other relatives, and they all live in these back alleys. To put it in the same terms as Japan, this place is an almshouse.”

“Almshouse?”

It was not a word Yasuo was familiar with, so he was not able to understand what that signified.

It looked like the same was true for Shouko as well, as she showed a baffled expression after blinking a few times.

“This place isn’t an orphanage?”

“To be called an orphanage, the institution would need enough leeway to provide those brats with a place to live, right? This place has neither the beds for them to sleep in nor sufficient food for them to eat. Right now, this place is a gathering spot for those brats, but it was originally an office for the purpose of helping the the war refugees from Torjesso to somehow get settled in Galedeite. Even if I wanted to take those brats in, I don’t have the infrastructure required. And if I tried to make it official, I’d just get hit with taxes and such.”

“No way.....”

According to what the old woman told them, for ten years after the war with Demon King Kaul, the neighboring kingdoms and the Gaz Commonwealth themselves provided a considerable amount of support, due to which the

Carnelian of the Coal Mine, including this House of the Fireflies, was able to provide a lot of help and support for the refugees.

However in recent years, the fact that a lot of the refugees had become permanent settlers caused the amount of support to dwindle, and once the Shii started to appear, the government had no leeway to support the poor people anymore due to rising social tensions, and support for such causes had gone down all over the country.

Due to the sharp decrease in the amount of support received, the Carnelian of the Coal Mine lost a fair bit of their organizational ability as well, and in the present situation, small facilities like this one were considered to be formerly associated with the Carnelian of the Coal Mine and communication with the main organization was basically non-existent. The day-to-day administration was seen to by the people who were originally the caretakers, such as this old woman, and they were keeping the facilities running with just whatever support they could gather from the local area.

“What sort of relation do you have with this House of Fireflies, Catalina-san.....?”

“This woman is a pretty strange one. She keeps trying to send us money that she earned from her incomprehensible job of being an artist that just sounds like a bored noble’s hobby.”

The old woman’s answer to Yasuo’s question sounded quite spiteful, but Catalina just smiled.

“Director Kelly here has always been a shy person, although she denies it vehemently. During the war with Demon King Kaul, she provided support for my family, but despite that, she refuses to take any but the bare minimum of support from other people. I for one just want to help because she is the person who saved the lives of my family members, but it’s so hard to even get her to accept my donations.”

Not knowing if they were actually praising each other or being spiteful, the two young people could only stare at the two older women.

The old woman, whose name was apparently Kelly, was not cowed by something of this level and she spoke as if spitting out something nasty.

“I have no intention of raising these children to have a mindset that someone will make it rain money if they are in a bad way. If all they do is to crawl on the ground and drink muddy water, then they will be shunned by society even after they become adults. By giving them the bare necessary amount of food and a place to clean their clothes, these brats can keep their self-dignity. That’s good enough. These brats have already had a bad birth and upbringing, so they need to learn that the world won’t save them even they get sulky. Too much support will only bring them harm.”

From those words that Director Kelly spoke quickly, no matter how coarse her language was, her love for the children was easy to see.

From her manner of speech, there was absolutely no hint of her willing to do something like controlling the Shii and misdirecting the self-respect of people.

“So, that’s why...”

Director Kelly one again looked at Yasuo and grabbed his shoulders with her thin arms.

“This is my request to you. Please, save this world.”

“Eh... Ah...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t do something stupid like going around and spreading word of your existence. However, in return, if you have come to Ante Lande to take up the same mission as your father did in saving this world, then please protect the future that these brats will live in when they grow up to be adults. That is my only request.....”

Perhaps that was something that could be called an entreaty.

However, Yasuo could not bear to shoulder her feelings, even as a lie to make her feel better.

That was because he had been shown many times that he did not have the strength required to do so.

Perhaps she sensed his bewilderment, Director Kelly showed a surprisingly gentle smile.

“I see, you’re a honest kid. My bad.”

Saying that, she took her hands off from Yasuo's shoulders.

"I heard that your father had a strong tendency to run away from things when he first came here as well. I get it, it can't be a nice feeling to be told all of a sudden that the fate of the world is in your hands. I hear that people in Japan are not considered adults by the society until they are fairly old. No matter, I'll just wait without hoping for too much."

"O...Okay....."

All Yasuo could do was to give a vague nod.

However, he got a more than adequate understanding of what Catalina wanted to show him here.

It was one side of the reality of 『the other world, Ante Lande』.

Catalina should not have any idea that Yasuo and Shouko had ties to the the higher-ups in Resteria.

However, despite that, she had attempted to dispel their misunderstandings about the society of this other world by showing them this reality.

Of course, this did not mean that Yasuo and Shouko's goal would change.

However, they were now acutely aware of the fact that this society in another world was still a fully-fledged society of humans that just had a different cultural background from Japan or any other country on Earth.

".....Your Japanese is quite good, Obaa-san."

When Shouko said that in the atmosphere that had become slightly more relaxed, Director Kelly snorted.

"Back in the old days of Carnelian, there were many cases where knowing the language of Hideo's hometown was a basic requirement to acquire the support of nobles and the like. There aren't many people who can speak it in Gaz, after all. By the way, you look like you are from Japan as well. Don't tell me, are you Madoka Sugiura's daughter or something?"

"Ah, no, I am....."

When Shouko shook her head, Yasuo felt a moment of indecision.

The name Madoka Sugiura had appeared in the conversation all of a sudden.

Should he just go ahead and reveal that that was his mother's name? Just the fact that he was Hideo's son was enough to make Director Kelly entrust the future of the children to him.

If she were to find out that he was the son of the Hero and the Sage, he might never be able to go back to Japan.

However, that moment of indecision turned out to be a blessing.

“*****?”

They suddenly heard the voice of a man who was calling out in their direction.

Yasuo suddenly lifted his head and looked in that direction, and Shouko unconsciously hid behind Yasuo.

He appeared to be in the first half of his twenties. He was one head taller than Yasuo, and had a robust body and gentle features.

Although Yasuo had never seen its like before, the thing the man had hanging from the belt of his well-ordered uniform was something even he could easily identify as a 『Techno Weapon』 that had the shape of a sword.

He was a Magitech Knight of the Gaz Commonwealth.

“** Catalina!”

It looked like the Magitech Knight knew Catalina, as his face lit up with a smile and he rushed towards her.

Catalina also smiled and gripped his proffered hand, and returned some sort of greeting to him.

Yasuo made sure that Shouko was hidden behind him just in case, and asked Catalina in a low voice.

“Who is this person...?”

“Ah, this man is a Magitech Knight of the garrison here in Galedeite. His name is Feigreid, and his rank is Sergeant Major.”

“Oh, I see we are speaking in Japanese now.”



After Catalina introduced the young Magitech Knight to Yasuo, the man who had been called Feigreid also suddenly began talking in Japanese.

“It is good that we ran into you here, Sergeant Major Feigreid. We had planned on visiting the office at Headquarters later. Will you be at the office today?”

“If you just say the word, I think even the Lieutenant Colonel would keep me in Headquarters until your business is complete. Is it important?”

Feigreid was speaking very politely to Catalina.

That was not particularly strange, seeing as Catalina was older than him, but if the 『Lieutenant Colonel』 whom he mentioned was his superior or the person who was in charge of that place called the headquarters, then perhaps Catalina had far more influence than Yasuo had suspected.

“I actually wanted to consult you about a request I have for the Knights Division. The matter is quite important, however, so I will explain the details later at Headquarters. I have some business I need to finish in the town first... let's see, can we meet in the afternoon?”

“I understand. I will wait for you there. By the way...”

Feigreid looked at Yasuo and Shouko who were standing behind Catalina with their hoods pulled low over their faces.

“Ah, these two?”

Catalina turned around as if she just remembered that they were there.

“They are actually relatives of a certain venerable person, so they are keeping a low profile while I show them around Galedeite. I'll introduce them to you later when we meet at Headquarters. Is that fine, you two?”

“.....Yes.”

“.....T-Thank you.”

Yasuo and Shouko felt very uneasy because they could not introduce themselves right away despite the fact that they were standing right in front of

him, but they were also discomfited by having a Magitech Knight staring seriously at them in the middle of the town like this.

Feigreid didn't seem to mind it much, however, and he straightened his posture and gave what appeared to be the Gaz Commonwealth's salute.

"I am Feigreid Rubiz, a knight assigned to the garrison here in Galedeite. It's a pleasure to meet you."

It was a self-introduction with an extremely refreshing and sincere attitude.

Due to that, the two of them just grew increasingly discomfited, but managed a polite reply.

"“It's nice to meet you...””

They spoke at the same time and bowed deeply.

"So, what business does the great Magitech Knight have in a place like this?"

At that point, Director Kelly saw her opportunity and inserted herself into their conversation.

As usual, her manner of speaking was acerbic, however, there was an undeniable joy in her voice.

Feigreid also looked like he was used to it, and he pulled out a bag from inside his shirt and tossed it in Director Kelly's direction.

As Director Kelly caught it, a fairly heavy sound of metal could be heard.

"I didn't want my little brothers and sisters to go hungry."

Saying that, Feigreid slumped his shoulders.

"This mother of mine is as frugal as they come, so if I don't give her an allowance she won't even eat properly. Actually, I was finally promoted to Second Lieutenant recently so I have a fair bit of leeway in my finances now."

In contrast to the straight-laced impression he had initially given, he now spoke in a very casual tone.

"Oh my. Congratulations!"

Catalina looked between Feigreid and Director Kelly and gave a small smile,

and Yasuo and Shouko understood that this was a standard conversation between these people.

“Feigreid-san, are you from the House of the Fireflies as well?”

“Hey, what kind of question is that. We don’t raise brats here, we just feed them.”

Director Kelly spoke as soon as Shouko asked that question as if trying to interrupt her, but Feigreid spoke over her as well.

“Yes, I am. Mother saw that I was particularly clever, so she zealously taught me what I would need to enter the Knights Division. Learning Japanese was a part of that as well.”

“.....”

“Well, that’s just what I think. Mother doesn’t accept it.”

“I see she’s the same as ever.”

Catalina smiled once more, and Director Kelly made a face like she had swallowed a bitter bug.

“If that’s all you came here for, then hurry up and go back!!”

“Yes, Yes, I understand. Well then, Catalina-san and the two of you as well, I look forward to meeting you this afternoon.”

Feigreid said that with a wry smile and bowed to Director Kelly and the rest of them, and walked away towards an alley with a bearing suitable for a soldier.

“Seriously, that boy always talks too much! By the way, Catalina! What exactly did you even come here for!?”

“Didn’t I just say it earlier? I was showing these esteemed children around the town and just dropped by to say hello.”

“Hmmp. I see, so you want to paint a picture of these kids and make another fortune, right!?”

“That’s not a bad idea. If I can sell it for a high price, I’ll consider making a donation to the House of the Fireflies.”

“Isn’t that what is called 『counting your hippos before they hatch』^[2] in

Japanese?”

““Pfft.””

“What’s so funny!?”

““S-Sorry...””

Both Yasuo and Shouko couldn’t hold in their laughter at Director Kelly’s bizarre mistake, but they apologized in earnest when they provoked her wrath.

“Oh?”

At some point, the children had come to stand beside Director Kelly and were looking at the three of them with half-curious and half-fearful gazes.

“H-Hello...”

Shouko bent down a little and waved her hand while making sure that the flame in her eye could not be seen, but the children didn’t react.

“U-Umm, do these children not know Japanese...?”

“These brats can barely read the language of their own country, you think they’d be able to speak a language from another world?”

“I-I see, that’s right. Umm, we’re not suspicious people or anything...”

“““”””

“Hahaha... I guess that sounds pretty suspicious.”

Even though Shouko tried speaking to them in a cheerful voice, she only received expressionless faces or suspicious looks.

Moreover, since Shouko had let go of Yasuo’s hand, she had to ensure that her face was covered to prevent the flame in her eye from being seen and couldn’t make eye contact with them at all, so that result might have been unavoidable.

“If you want to appeal to the brats, bring them something to eat.”

“Something to eat... But the snacks and bento I have are nowhere near enough for all the children, and we’re basically penniless right now.....”

In contrast to the children’s cold response, Shouko was worrying about them

earnestly.

“There’s no point worrying about it. To these children, the two of us probably just look like strange outsiders. I think at the most they just trust that we are not bad people because they saw us speaking to the Director.”

Yasuo said that in a consoling tone, and Director Kelly also nodded.

“That’s right. Besides, if you underestimate them because they’re brats, you’ll regret it. Even I have no idea what sort of trouble they get up to in the town.”

“I’d really like to believe that that isn’t the case, though.”

Children who live on the streets after losing their parents have limited choices in what they can do to rebuild their lives.

Among them, there might be a few who take up criminal activities like pickpocketing.

However, Galedeite did not seem to be a town with such lax security, so it should be unlikely that they would actually do something to Yasuo and Shouko...

“Like I said, that sort of thinking is too naive. You there!”

When Yasuo was thinking that aloud, Director Kelly suddenly grabbed a boy who was standing a little away from the other children who had gathered around them, and forcibly dragged him towards her by the back of his neck.

“Eh? Wh-What...”

Yasuo was taken aback at Director Kelly’s sudden actions.

“Show me what’s in your pockets!”

The boy had washed his shirt using the well water, but his pants were still covered in soot.

Looking closely, they could see that the boy had something rectangular in one of his frayed pockets, and Director Kelly forcibly pulled it out of his pocket despite his resistance.

“Ah!?”

Yasuo’s eyes opened wide when he saw what it was.

What Director Kelly had snatched away from the boy was nothing other than Yasuo's Slimphone.

"Oh my. I suppose he took it earlier when the bell rang and they came running towards us."

Yasuo also remembered after Catalina said that.

A large number of children had darted past their legs when the bell rang in the House of the Fireflies.

So his Slimphone had been pickpocketed at that time?

"Hmm. What is this thing? It looks like strange slate, but is this one of the mysterious tools from Japan?"

From the way the boy was shouting at Director Kelly, he appeared to be angry that his catch had been taken away from him. However, she just let go of his neck and delivered a blow to the top of his head, and returned the Slimphone to Yasuo.

"This is a one-time deal. The next time you let your guard down, I won't help you out."

"T-Thank you..."

"It would be too hard to bear if you lost interest in saving this town because that slate was stolen from you, after all."

Director Kelly said that, and it appeared that she was already seeing him as a prospective savior who had come from another world, just like Hideo.

"I... don't have the intention or power to do something like that... but....."

Yasuo looked from the boy's resentful gaze to the Slimphone in his hand, and gritted his teeth.

And then, he took a step forward, and bent down in front of the boy who had pickpocketed him.

".....?"

Yasuo brought his Slimphone closer to the boy who was looking at him suspiciously.

“!?”

All of a sudden, music started to issue from the Slimphone’s speaker, and the boy, the other children, and even Catalina and Director Kelly were taken aback.

“What was that? It didn’t sound like the music from a music box...?”

Catalina said that in a surprised tone.

“It’s just that kind of tool.”

Yasuo gave a brief explanation, and beckoned towards Shouko.

While the others were still surprised, Yasuo showed Shouko the screen without letting any of the others see it, and after seeing what was on it, Shouko looked at him with a slightly surprised expression.

“I-I’ll give it a shot. It’s been a while, but I should be able to manage while looking at the lyrics. Yeah.”

Despite her face going a little red, Shouko understood what Yasuo intended to do and touched the replay button on the screen.

When she did that, the gentle melody of 『Hometown』^[3] started to fill their surroundings.

On his Slimphone, Yasuo had downloaded a large number of practice songs back when he was still in the Choir Club that no longer existed, and he had many recordings of practice songs as well.

That song was once loved by the people for its representation of Japan’s roots. However, in this day and age, there were probably not many people who spent their childhood, as the lyrics of the song went, 『chasing rabbits and fishing for carp』.

In the current era, Yasuo felt that if anything, the song served as a symbolic reminder that was different for everyone, and served to remind each individual of their own childhood.

Shouko took the lead, and Yasuo supported her by taking the bass line, and the two of them sang the relaxed lyrics of the song.

First, they sang of their childhood, then they sang of their memories of their

parents and friends, and finally they sang about how the best kind of success is the success you bring back to your hometown.

The children of the House of the Fireflies were certainly not living a blessed life.

However, they still had adults who loved and cherished them, and there would be people like Feigreid who achieved success in life and cared for their juniors.

Yasuo felt that the song 『Hometown』 perfectly suited the children from the House of the Fireflies.

By the time the relaxing melody ended, the children had a slight, but definite, look of curiosity in their eyes about the mysterious tool and Shouko and Yasuo's mixed chorus.

“***!”

“Eh?”

A little girl who kept looking between Yasuo, Shouko, and the Slimphone, shouted something while tugging on Yasuo's great coat.

“***!” “***!” “***!”

“W-What?”

After that, the other children also started to shout the same word one after the other, causing Yasuo to become confused.

“They are saying, ‘Once more.’”

“Once more? I wonder if it's fine to sing the same song again.”

“Singing the same song would be fine, but I think a different song would make them even happier.”

After hearing Catalina say that, Yasuo took back his Slimphone from Shouko and started to search for a song that would not be too difficult for Shouko to sing.

“Find something which has the lyrics displayed, please.”

“Yeah, I know, but...”

Since they could not connect to the internet, Shouko would not be able to use her own Slimphone to confirm the lyrics of songs that she barely remembered.

However, the majority of the songs on Yasuo's Slimphone were just audio files, so he was not sure what to do.

"Do you remember this one? The set piece from the chorus competition in middle school."

"Ah, this one. Yeah, compared to the others, it should be fine."

Completely different from the previous song, a rhythmic melody started to play and while the children, Director Kelly, and Catalina once again widened their eyes in amazement, Yasuo and Shouko lightly tapped their feet in time to the beat and started to hum the melody.

It was a cheerful ballad of a monster^[4] that traveled along with a human caravan because it wished to see the ocean.

The cheerful rhythm appeared to lift the spirits of the children from Galedeite as well, as a few of them started jumping up and down in concert with Yasuo and Shouko who continued to tap their feet.

Eventually, the boy who had originally pickpocketed Yasuo's Slimphone also couldn't resist, and he joined the other children as they started to either sing or shout in tune with the song from a foreign land which was in a language they had never heard before.

"They never say a word of thanks to me despite the fact that I give them bread every day, and now look at these stupid brats."

Director Kelly snorted like she was displeased, but her eyes never left the group of children and Yasuo, who was at the center of them.

"They've just grown used to your affection. But they will remember it once they grow older, like Feigreid."

"That sounds pretty aggravating in its own way."

Catalina looked at the tool that was playing music using some mysterious ability, and the young boys and girls who were singing and dancing.

"It's strange, isn't it?"

“Hmm?”

“He possesses barely any mana. If not for that face of his, no one would believe that he is Hideo’s son.”

“Well, despite what I said earlier, I don’t really believe it either.”

“Even so... he is using his own power to make the children smile, as if it’s the natural thing to do. I wonder if it’s in his blood after all.”

“Don’t you think it’s just because he was brought up well? Still, I won’t deny that it might be a talent that is rare in this current world of ours. More than that, I am curious about that young girl.”

“.....So you noticed it after all?”

“Well of course, given that we were talking while standing so close to each other. It keeps increasing and decreasing in size every time she moves farther or closer to the boy, it just stands out even more that way.”

“I’ll make sure to warn them about that. What about the children?”

“The brats have never seen that before, so even if they catch a glimpse of it, they shouldn’t know what it means.”

“About that...”

“If I was going to make a fuss about that, I would have done it long ago. There must be some circumstances behind it, right? I’m not so young that I would go sticking my head into such troublesome things.”

“.....Thank you.”

The two of them were looking at the hood that Shouko still wore low over her eyes.

No matter how much she tried to hide her eyes with a hood, from the angle that the children were looking at her, it should have been apparent at a glance.

The girl who had a black flame burning in her eye.

The children were not afraid simply because they didn’t know what it was.

“What are you going to do? If you take someone like her to Feigreid, you can’t complain even if he throws her in prison right away.”

“Of course, I will properly explain the circumstances to him.”

“Well, that’s fine and all, but even I’ve gotten a message from the Foreman after a long time asking me to send her any information I come across regarding the Shii, so that she can trade that information with the parliament of the Commonwealth in return for more support. That girl isn’t as safe as you people seem to think. The fear of the Shii is growing more tangible as the days pass, and there’s no telling when some bastard will find fault with the girl and stab her in the back.”

“.....I’ll keep that in mind.”

Director Kelly slumped her shoulders like she found the whole matter to be boring, walked up to the group of children who were pestering Yasuo and Shouko to sing another song, and set about the task of forcibly pulling them away from the two of them.

“That’s enough, any more and they are going to start charging you money to listen. And you two as well, if you are performers, then stop putting on a show for free!”

“P-Performers?”

“You play music from some strange contraption, sing, and dance. What else am I supposed to call you, if not performers? Ah! Which one of you brats just kicked me!?”

All the children unanimously shouted abuses at Director Kelly who barged in to interrupt their fun time, but Director Kelly just glared at the two of them... or rather, she glared at Shouko.

“You two, it’s not really a good time for you to attract attention, is it? If some strange person comes to see what all the fuss is about and makes a report to the guards, it’s not going to end well.”

Both Yasuo and Shouko were taken aback when they saw Director Kelly point at her left eye.

Director Kelly had realized it, and in spite of that, she had trusted Shouko for the sake of the children.

She had trusted that Shouko was really a human being.

“.....I’m sorry. That was careless of me.”

Shouko immediately apologized, and once again adjusted her hood so it covered her face.

“You two are staying with Catalina right now, aren’t you? Don’t do anything that would cause trouble for her. Also...”

Director Kelly sniffled once and picked up a child who was sticking close to her legs.

“The next time you come here, make sure you are able to show these kids your faces. If you do that, I will at least serve you tea.”

“Y-Yes!!”

Shouko said that in a trembling voice, and Yasuo also bowed to her.

Catalina judged that it was an appropriate time and came to put her hands on their shoulders, and the three of them turned away from the House of the Fireflies.

Yasuo, who had once again picked up Catalina’s luggage suddenly turned around, and saw that the children were standing as a group near Director Kelly and were shouting something to him while waving their hands energetically.

“They are saying, ‘Come again.’”

Both Yasuo and Shouko felt tears rise up in their eyes after hearing Catalina’s translation and they pulled their hoods even lower over their eyes, but they did still properly wave back to the children and Director Kelly as they walked away from the House of the Fireflies.

Translation Notes:

[1] [Gakuran](#) ↑

[2] The actual Japanese idiom is “捕らぬ狸の皮算用” which basically means the same thing as “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch”. But Kelly says it as “虎とタヌキとカバさんよ” which sounds similar but is just gibberish. ↑

[3] The name of a song. [Hometown](#) ↑

[3] Another song that seems to be popular with children. [A Monster's Ballad](#)



Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Chapter 4

Interlude – 3

“It takes money to operate the Gate Tower, right?”

“I’ve heard that it is about three percent of the country’s yearly budget.”

“I understand why Dad and Shouko-san had to go, but Onii-chan is basically just going there for sightseeing, was it really okay to spend all that money on him? Of course, I understand that it is for Shouko-san’s sake, to make her feel more at ease. But since you are spending money from the country’s budget, I was just wondering, is it really okay to be so lenient? It comes from the taxes paid by the citizens, right? Won’t they find it troublesome?”

“Taxes?”

“Eh? It’s not? That’s what I heard from Diana-san, though.”

“Aah, I suppose that depends on how you put it. It’s true that it takes the equivalent of nearly three percent of the country’s annual budget to operate the Gate Tower. But it’s not like the country pays for each and every single trip.”

“Eh?”

“For example, let us assume that Resteria’s annual budget is one hundred trillion yen. three percent of that would be three trillion yen, right? Who do you think has to pay that three trillion yen for it to be counted as 『three percent of the country’s annual budget』?”

“Hmm?”

“I am fairly certain that the Krone family is paying the entire expense for all three of them for this trip. In other words, the funds are from the personal assets of Her Excellency Erijina, Dianaze’s mother.”

“Haah!? Three trillion yen, from her personal assets!?”

“Well, the three trillion figure was just an example, and the currency conversion rates are also completely different, so I don’t think it is actually as expensive as it looks to a Japanese person like you.”

“I’ll need to lecture Onii-chan and Shouko-san when they get back.”

“Eh?”

“They’re already getting to have fun and eat delicious things over there, as his little sister I can’t forgive him for doing all of that on someone else’s dime!”

“No, I doubt they are spending all their time only on having fun...”

“Even though I have more talent for sorcery!!”

“Aah... So you were feeling jealous.”

“Of course I’m jealous! I wanted to go and look around there as well! I mean, a trip to another world where your safety is guaranteed is bound to be fun, no matter what happens! Aarrrrgh! Why do I have to spend my time going to school while Onii-chan is going on dates with Diana-san and Shouko-san!!?”

“Hahaha...”

Chapter 4 – A New Threat

Galedeite’s Central Market was surrounded by a fairly short wall.

The wall had a number of gates interspersed along it, where soldiers were standing guard. Catalina handed one of them some money and received what appeared to be a wooden token in return.

“Yasuo, can you please hold on to my bag for a bit?”

“Ah, sure. Do people need to pay to gain admission to the market?”

“That’s right. I am not a resident of Galedeite, so I need to pay a tax to buy or sell anything in this market. This wooden token serves as proof that I have paid the tax, and as long as I carry this, it also means that I do not have to pay any further taxes while inside the market that are levied on residents of the town.”

“So it’s something like a consumption tax?”

“I guess so. It’s probably something like foreigners being exempt from local taxes. Yasu-kun, do you want me to hold one of those?”

“Shouko, wait.”

Seeing Yasuo carrying three large sacks all by himself, Shouko felt sorry for him and was about to take one of them from him, when both Catalina and the gate guard shot sharp looks in her direction.

“If you carry that, we’ll just have to pay even more money. Yasuo, I’m sorry, but please carry them by yourself from here on.”

“Eh? Ah, yes...”

The guard didn’t take his eyes off them while the three of them passed through the gate.

Shouko briefly wondered if the guard had seen the flames of the Shii in her eye, but after she saw Catalina give a small sigh of relief, she understood that that was not the case.

“Since there is only one person carrying the items that will be traded, we only have to pay the tax for one person — that is basically the rule here.”

“Eh?”

“If you had taken one of those sacks, Shouko, it would have counted as two people in total who were looking to do business. If that happened, we would have needed to pay four times the tax. That is the rule.”

“W-What kind of rule is that? What’s the point of such a rule...”

“This is the most efficient method to collect taxes. I’m sure the two of you understand why I, a person who is not a resident of Galedeite, have to pay a tax in order to use the market, right?”

Yasuo and Shouko looked at each other when they were asked that question.

The people of Japan had a bad habit of attempting to evade taxes where possible because it was seen as money being taken away by the government, and talking a lot about the various methods to do so and their rate of success without really trying to understand them in more detail, but Yasuo, who studied about modern society as part of his third year social studies curriculum in high

school, thought about the question seriously.

Before long, he arrived at an answer.

“Maybe it is for the protection of merchants who reside inside this town that is basically fortress? So the money paid to the guard at the entrance to the market was not an entry fee, but rather the minimum amount of import tax.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

In preparation for a scenario where popular goods were brought in from outside to compete with the existing items in Galedeite’s market, they were levying a tax based on the quantity of the products being brought in from outside the town.

By doing that, they could ensure that the price of such items would not differ greatly from the items already being sold in the market.

Seeing as the tax would increase dramatically if two people carried the merchandise, they probably had a separate way of calculating the tax for when items were carried in on a wagon as well.

The import tax served to dissuade merchants from flooding the market with a large number of products from outside the city.

On the other hand, making it too hard to bring in items from outside would just cause a different set of problems, so the tax was specially reduced for small businesses that only traded an amount of products that could be carried by a single person.

The truth was that the large number of various street hawkers and people like Catalina who did not conduct trade as their main source of income also greatly supported the lives of the people living in Galedeite.

Even if they reduced the taxes for each individual, they could make up for it due to the large number of such small-time businesses.

Of course, they would properly take a large amount of tax money from merchants who brought in a large number of products.

While Yasuo was talking about that to himself, Shouko also understood and accepted what he said, but there was still one thing she had a question about.

“In that case, why didn’t they just collect the import tax at the town gates? The toll we paid to enter the town wasn’t all that high, right?”

“Probably because it is an important travel hub that is sandwiched between two large world powers. The fact that this country is a republic probably has a lot to do with it as well. Moreover, I guess that the method of collecting the taxes changes all the time depending on who holds power in the parliament.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

Catalina affirmed Yasuo’s hypothesis in a tone filled with admiration.

An important travel hub would usually have a toll checkpoint where they would thoroughly evaluate everything from bootlaces to every last nail on a wagon and collect the appropriate amount of tax in order to let the town prosper. However, the Gaz Commonwealth was on the verge of exhaustion after the war with Demon King Kaul, and they did not have the military resources to oppose the major world powers, Resteria and Baskelgarde.

Moreover, the Gaz Commonwealth was in a position wherein they would have to depend on either one of those countries for support in case of a crisis, and so they could not levy high taxes on them as that could lead to an increase in political pressure from both countries.

And besides, there was already a trend of reducing economic activity due to the threat from the Shii, and in such a scenario, continuing to collect the entire tax at the town gates could not really be considered to be a smart way of going about it.

This balance was particularly important for fortress towns that did not have any intention of increasing the amount of available land, unless they were willing to invest in large-scale building and improvement of their walls like Galedelite.

If they were too strict, they would run into shortages of products, which would lead to black market trading growing more rampant.

This method of tax collection would most likely be flexibly tweaked in the future as well, based on factors such as protecting the interests of craftsmen who lived inside the city, maintaining public order, and maintaining a

balance with nearby towns neighboring countries.

“In fact, there are opinions that the country should raise the taxes to a more standard level and in return open up the markets more for other industries and imported goods, and thereby boost the economy within country. Right now, neither the parliament of the country nor the governance in the fortress towns are able to settle matter. It is as if every time they decide on one thing, something else breaks down.”

“It was the same with the House of the Fireflies as well, but it all seems similar to the stuff you hear about on the news in Japan. It seems you can’t escape from taxes even in a world of swords and magic.”

Neither Yasuo nor Shouko had the slightest amount of interest in settling down permanently in Ante Lande, but they were once again forced to understand how harsh the world of adults could be, even if that was in fact in a different world.

Speaking of taxes, during the middle ages on Earth, there was apparently a large tax levied on people who lived in towns for water supply. Going by that, it was not hard to imagine that the House of the Fireflies, which had a well inside the property, must be burdened with that kind of tax as well.

Despite that, the reason why they did not abandon that property and that house was because even a single water pipe would make it easier for the children to stay clean, and because of the monetary support provided by Catalina and Feigreid.

“Oh well, nothing will change even if we stand around here talking about it amongst ourselves. Let’s put the weighty considerations aside and have lunch, although it’s a little early.”

Catalina said that to cheer the two of them up, and once again started walking ahead of them.

They walked to a corner of the market where there was a shop that looked like warehouse, and once they reached it, Catalina took the bags that Yasuo was carrying and handed them over to the middle-aged shop owner.

Yasuo and Shouko couldn’t tell whether the price fetched by the three sacks

of tea beans was high or low, but Catalina looked fairly satisfied with the sale.

At that moment, the sound of gentle bells echoed throughout the market, and Catalina told them that the sound signified that it was noon.

“That sound was kind of strange, though.”

Shouko looked around restlessly.

“Rather than a bell, it sounded like the chimes used in school.”

After she said that, Yasuo also felt that the sound did not come directly from a bell tower somewhere, but instead, it somewhat resembled the sound of chimes that were played over speakers throughout a school.

It sounded like an electronic tone, although in this case, it may be more accurate to say it sounded like a Magitech tone.

“Ah, that’s probably the reason you’re looking for.”

Catalina was pointing at what looked like a round object affixed to the top of a utility pole.

“The sound of the bells comes from that round thing on top of the pole. This is related to the tax collection we were speaking of earlier as well, but this town is fairly strict about being on time. However, with all the crowded buildings around here, the sound from a regular bell tower won’t reach very far, so they use Magitech engineering to transmit the sound in that way.”

Hearing that, they understood that it was basically the same thing as a school chime, except for the fact that it used sorcery to work.

“It will ring loudly once more in the evening. Once that bell rings, the market and all business except for a select few will have to close for the day, and unless they have a special permit, people will no longer be allowed to enter or leave through the town gates.”

Perhaps it was similar to the five o’clock chime^[1] in Japan that urges children to return to their homes.

Apart from that fact that all the systems used mana as a power source, it looked like Ante Lande as a whole was blessed with a fairly rapid rate of technological development.

Yasuo remembered hearing from Diana that the comparatively more developed regions had escalators, and they also had the technology to record audio and video on 8mm tapes.

Thinking about it that way, perhaps the gap in technological development between Japan and Ante Lande was a lot smaller than Yasuo had originally imagined.

No, if you consider how the use of magic and sorcery had become commonplace to a certain extent, Ante Lande already surpassed Japan in some respects..

“Looking at this, I feel like I can understand how Diana-san and Khalija-san got used to living in Japan so quickly.”

Shouko said that in a low tone so that Catalina would not hear, and Yasuo agreed with her wholeheartedly.

“Right then, it’s time for lunch. The plaza over there has benches that we can use freely, so let’s secure a spot and go buy something.”

“Ah, please wait.”

Shouko stopped Catalina who seemed to be in high spirits.

“My bento will go bad if I don’t eat it by today, so I don’t need anything.”

“Bento?”

“Yes, I prepared it before we came here... I-I mean, I prepared it to eat for lunch with him.”

Shouko nearly forgot that the two of them were supposed to be lovers, and they were supposed to have been on a date before coming to this other world.

As Shouko had picked the ingredients for the bento without considering that the food would have to stay fresh for a while, she thought that she should eat it as soon as possible.

“Eh? You mean that is food from Japan!? Really!?”

Catalina looked at Shouko’s bag with sparkling eyes.

“Ante Lande has Japanese-style food as well, you know.”

Not only Shouko, but even Yasuo had not heard about that before.

“Really!?”

“Yes. The cooking techniques of the Great Sage Madoka Sugiura who came from the same world as the Hero Hideo have spread throughout the land.”

“Pfft.”

Yasuo unintentionally let out a snort of laughter.

Now that he thought about it, he remembered hearing on some occasion that his mother’s cooking had been inherited by Resteria’s Knights Division, and that it was still quite popular.

He had also heard that his mother had single-handedly taken up the job of cooking the meals during the time when she had traveled with Hideo, Erijina, and Alexei.

However, he had not imagined that it had spread throughout the world with the label of 『Japanese-style food』.

If he told this mother that, she might feel overcome by a sense of responsibility and start to mope.

Also, he would now have to properly say what he had not been able to say earlier.

“Umm, Catalina-san... I was curious about it earlier as well, but the Madoka Sugiura you mentioned...”

“Eh? Ah, she was one of your father’s comrades, and fought against Demon King Kaul by his side—”

“That’s my mother’s name.”

“Eh?”

For some reason, Catalina’s expression suddenly stiffened.

No, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that her expression twisted.

Catalina, who usually had a clever and intelligent air about her, was furrowing her eyebrows so much that even the skin on her nose was wrinkled, and her mouth was set in a twisted expression. After seeing that, Yasuo feared that he

had made some sort of a blunder.

“Ah... well... I suppose that makes sense.”

However, her twisted expression that looked like one of deep resentment faded along with her sigh, and she slumped her shoulders as if she was dejected.

“I see, so it’s like that after all. I guess that’s only obvious. Fufufu...”

“C-Catalina-san?”

“Oh, it’s nothing...”

It didn’t seem like it was nothing, no matter how you looked at it. However Catalina was giving off a vibe that implied that she would not entertain any more questions on the matter.

Yasuo had expected a more surprised reaction to the fact that the Hero Hideo and The Rainbow Sage were married, so her current reaction was not quite what he had expected. However, it might have just been the case that Catalina didn’t really care too much about such things.

In any case, he had managed to raise the subject of his mother in a very natural and calm manner, so he could put that matter to rest.

“Haa... Anyway, let’s focus on lunch for now. Haa...”

Shouko also was not able to hide her confusion at Catalina’s behaviour, who was quite obviously not concentrating on lunch at all. However, Shouko still held her bento box out towards Catalina and opened the lid.

“Shouko, if you’re okay with it, can I have a taste of what real Japanese-style food tastes like? In return, I’ll treat you to some food from this market that is famous for being the most delicious.”

“That’s fine. Although this doesn’t really count as proper Japanese-style food at all.”

As Shouko’s bento had been prepared yesterday, there was quite a bit of condensation inside the box and the contents looked wilted.

However, even Yasuo, who knew nothing about cooking, could tell that the

food was prepared while taking the appearance and nutritional balance into account, and she had even taken into consideration the fact that she would be eating it on the move inside the Gate Tower, despite the fact that she had made that bento for herself.

The box was double-layered, and the top compartment contained the side dishes.

They consisted of fried chicken, cherry tomatoes, and what appeared to be frozen *shumai*.

It had already deviated quite a bit from traditional Japanese-style food by this point, but as for what came next, there was no way to put it but to say that it was as expected of the daughter from the Restaurant Saburo.

Thick slices of *tamagoyaki* that still looked like they had been perfectly fried despite the fact that they were cold and a lot of time had passed since they were made, and a *kinpira* made from carrots, burdock, lotus roots, and konjac. Radish that looked like it had been stewed in a fairly strong stock, and *ganmodoki*.

The contents that were a perfect amalgamation of these gave off a slight aroma that was characteristic of bento.

“I see, so this is Japan’s cooking!”

“The lower compartment has rice balls. And this is *inari sushi*.”

“You’re talking about rice that has been shaped like a ball, right? We have those here as well. What is this *inari sushi*?”

“It is a type of food where you stuff rice into pockets of properly simmered and deep-fried tofu. This brown-colored part is the deep-fried tofu. This is undoubtedly Japanese-style food, so please try some if you would like. Do you know how to use chopsticks?”

Catalina also looked like she was accustomed to using chopsticks just like Diana and Khalija, as she effortlessly used the disposable chopsticks that Shouko handed to her and ate a small-sized *inari sushi* in one bite.

“.....Mmm, it’s delicious. This deep-fried tofu is very nice and sweet. Is this

something that can be made at home in Japan?”

“It’s certainly possible to make it yourself, but I think it would be pretty difficult. Do you have a variety of beans called soybeans here?”

“Soybeans... I’ve never heard that name before. That’s what they are called in your world, right?”

“Yes. They are a little bigger than the tea beans you sold earlier, and they are often used to as an ingredient in making condiments in Japan as well. This soup powder was made using the same beans as one of the ingredients as well.”

Saying that, Shouko pulled out a sealed packet of miso soup stock.

The actual miso powder was not visible since it was sealed in an aluminium packet, but Shouko pointed to the image of miso soup on the packaging, and Catalina looked between the image and the deep-fried tofu several times.

As they could not boil water to prepare the soup, Shouko put the packet of miso soup powder back into her bag and continued her explanation.

“The deep-fried tofu is made by squeezing soy milk out of those soybeans, coagulating it into a white, jelly-like substance using *nigari* made from sea salt, and then frying it several times in oil of varying temperatures.”

“I know what salt is, but I’ve never heard of *nigari*. We have beans that have a lot of juice in them, but I have no idea if they are the same beans you are talking about, and I’ve never heard of them being used as ingredients to make condiments either. I can’t justify purchasing oil just for the purpose of making this either, so I don’t think I will be able to cook this. That’s unfortunate.”

It goes without saying that the method to prepare tofu and deep fry it is not something high school students study about for their exams, so this was yet another thing that was only possible due to Shouko’s position as the daughter of Restaurant Saburou.

After that, Catalina received several more portions of the bento from Shouko and she looked spoke while looking very satisfied.

“You must be very lucky to have a sweetheart who is so good at cooking.”

“Ah, umm, yeah.”

This was a setting that he had created himself, but when someone else started to talk about it, he couldn't help but feel embarrassed.

"Oh, I'm still nowhere close to being a good cook."

Shouko showed true humility, probably she knew just how good the real thing was.

"Even so... I think it's still quite delicious."

Yasuo gave his honest opinion, which caused Shouko to glare at him with a red face for some reason, and Catalina looked at him with a lukewarm gaze.

".....! Y-Yasu-kun, you're so..."

"Oh, my."

"Eh?"

"Geez..."

"Eh? Eh?"

Despite being confused, Yasuo realized that he had once again committed a verbal gaffe, and that he had said something that caused Catalina to take up a teasing tone.

Yasuo stuffed his cheeks with the sandwich Catalina had bought for him which had a lot of vegetables he had never seen before, and looked at the ground to preclude any further comments.

In contrast, Catalina, who was happily eating Shouko's tamagoyaki, suddenly looked upwards and spoke in a soft voice.

"Aah... If I had gone along with them back then, would things be different now?"

"What are you talking about?"

".....It's nothing. Yasuo, I'm sure this is something you wouldn't like to hear about."

"Haa... I don't really get it..... but, the vegetables here are pretty tasty. The dressing is quite peculiar as well, it unexpectedly tastes like soy sauce."

"Ah, I thought the same thing."

Yasuo thought that Catalina's reply to his question was quite strange, but he understood to some extent that she was thinking of something in the past that he might not be capable of understanding.

Perhaps Catalina had realized that Yasuo and Shouko were trying to change the subject, as she nodded slightly and then put on a mischievous smile.

"Soy sauce, huh? What if I told you that it is also something that Madoka left behind?"

"Huh!? This too!?"

Yasuo was shocked that details about his parents' preferences had permeated so deeply even into the light meals sold in the middle of a town, but Catalina put her hand over her mouth and laughed.

"I was joking. I didn't expect you to believe me so easily."

Yasuo scowled when he realized that he was being teased by Catalina, but then he saw that Shouko was also laughing.

Looking at the two of them laughing like that, Yasuo felt that it would be okay to let it slide.

"Seriously, geez."

Despite that, Yasuo still left a reluctant comment for the sake of his meagre pride, and finished off the sandwich somewhat violently.

"Right then, now that we have finished eating, it's time to go meet Second Lieutenant Feigreid. Have the two of you had enough to eat?"

Catalina clapped her hands once and spoke, as if to dispel the previous mood.

"If anything, the really important part for you two is going to begin now, so you should eat up and regain your strength..."

It was at that moment.

They heard a faint scream from the direction of the market.

At the same time the three of them had raised their heads, they started to hear intermittent sounds of things being destroyed.

"Pack up your belongings!"

Catalina's voice had a sharp edge to it, and both Yasuo and Shouko obeyed her without making a fuss.

Even as they were doing that, the screams gradually started to get louder.

"Ah!!"

From the corner of their eyes, they saw a street stall get blown into the air as if there had been an explosion.

The fruits and vegetables that were being sold, the baskets and crates that held them, and even the stall itself went flying through the air, and a fruit that looked like an apple fell to the ground near Yasuo's feet and broke apart.

"W-What's going on...!?"

"Yasu-kun, over there!"

Shouko suddenly pointed towards upwards.

When Yasuo turned to see what she was pointing at, he saw that five people equipped with light armor had appeared on top of the wall that surrounded the market, and they flew off towards the direction in which the screams were coming from.

Those superhuman movements, and uniforms similar to the one Feig Reid was wearing.

"Magitech Knights!"

It was a squad of Magitech Knights from the Gaz Commonwealth.

At the same time, a large number of people who were dressed like guards rushed into the market and urged the people there to vacate the premises.

As Yasuo and the others were still confused, the reason for the disturbance suddenly appeared before them.

A pillar of rippling black flames appeared in front of the guards who were urging people to seek shelter.

"Shii!!"

"In such a crowded place!?"

Yasuo and Shouko shouted, and Catalina suddenly turned around to look at the wall where the Magitech Knights had appeared.

“I see, so that’s why the response was so fast...! You two, it’s time to run away. If they find Shouko here, they might kill her!”

“Eh!?”

Shouko looked taken aback when she was told that she might be killed, but Yasuo suddenly realized something.

Catalina’s fear was not exaggerated at all.

The Shii had no place in human society as they were monsters that pierced and stole the hearts of people and were hence enemies of humanity through and through.

If Shouko, who had the flames of the Shii in her left eye, was found by Magitech Knights who did not know her circumstances, there was no telling what they would do to her.

“It looks like we had better postpone our visit to the Headquarters. Due to the appearance of the Shii, it is likely that Second Lieutenant Feig Reid will be at the scene of the incident as well. If we go around asking for him all of a sudden, we might put Shouko in danger.”

The two of them followed Catalina as she started to run away from the market area before they were caught up in the chaos that was gradually spreading.

“Catalina-san! In front of you!”

However, a pillar of black flame suddenly burst out of the ground directly ahead of Catalina, who was running while keeping an eye on their surroundings.

By the time Catalina looked to the front after hearing Yasuo’s warning, the Shii was brandishing a weapon that looked like a black longsword at her.

Yasuo was reflexively about to close his eyes to avoid looking at the tragic event he was sure must follow in the next second.

“Don’t close your eyes! Closing your eyes on the battlefield will get you killed!”

After hearing Catalina's warning, Yasuo just barely managed to open his eyes again.

Catalina used her hand that was covered with light to alter the path of the sword that the Shii swung down, and the sword cut through the air and slammed into the ground.

"Oh ancient being, break through the human commandments!!"

The Shii was off balance, and when Catalina chanted that spell, a stake burst out of the ground that was paved with bricks and impaled the Shii.

"Run!"

"A-Are we just going to leave it like this?"

"In my current condition, I can't defeat it with my magic! Let's leave it to the Magitech Knights!"

After saying that, Catalina ran off with a force that precluded any objections from Yasuo and Shouko. They could only follow after her.

"W-Where are we running to!?"

"Haah... Haah... L-Looking at how quickly the Magitech Knights arrived, I honestly don't know if there is a safe place where we can hide."

"How quickly they arrived? What do you mean?"

"The Magitech Knights appeared far too quickly after we first heard the screams... The only explanation is that they were already in the field, dealing with Shii that had popped up throughout the town."

"Throughout the town... Yasu-kun! The children at the House of the Fireflies!"

".....Ah!"

"This is bad! If the Shii appear there, Obaa-chan won't be able to protect the children by herself!"

".....Dammit."

Yasuo's legs were already shaking.

Looking at Catalina's battle strength, if they were to believe her own

assessment of her ability, then she was only a little stronger than Yasuo.

Should he leave it up to Shouko and her Shii power that had ripped through the wolves in the forest?

No, there were too many uncertain factors about it to truly call it 『Shouko's power』, and moreover, using that power had a high chance of making the Magitech Knights turn against them.

On the other hand, he himself was only barely able to release a small jolt of electricity from the palm of his hand when he was touching his opponent, so what good was he in such a fight?

The people with overwhelming fighting strength, Diana, Khalija, his father, and his mother were not around.

If they went there, both he and Shouko might get killed.

If he went there, and ran into a Shii, there was nothing he could do.

But even so.

“Goddammit!!”

When he thought of the children who had sung out of tune with him and Shouko, he could not bring himself to run away.

Yasuo turned towards the street that they had walked out of just a short time ago, and rushed back without saying a word.

“!”

Shouko followed closely behind him.

“H-Hey, you two!!”

Catalina also followed them while looking flustered.

While running, Yasuo thought about the situation optimistically on purpose to calm himself down.

So far, he had not seen more than six Shii appear in a place at the same time.

Back then, Khalija had released roughly thirty Shii within Tokorozawa.

The Shii had appeared inside the town as if aiming for the time when he was

inside, but in such a large town, there was no way that the Shii would bother with the House of the Fireflies which was located deep inside the alleys and had few people nearby.

Before such a thing could happen, that Magitech Knight called Feigreid would come running to save them for sure.

Their worries were unfounded.

“Obaa-chan!!”

However, Shouko’s scream cut through Yasuo’s optimism.

“No way...”

The three of them arrived in front of the courtyard of the House of the Fireflies at almost the same time when Director Kelly, who was standing protectively in front of the children, was slashed diagonally across her chest by a longsword-wielding Shii.

“Guh....!!”

Catalina placed her hands on the ground, and the mana she released from the palms of her hands sped towards the Shii that had slashed Director Kelly while ripping up the flagstones.

However, the distance between them was too large.

The Shii easily jumped up high to avoid the stake the burst out of the ground, and landed in a composed manner on the roof of the House of Fireflies.

Judging from its equipment and the way it moved, there was no doubt that this Shii was originally someone who was greatly skilled at fighting.

“Catalina-san!! Please try to keep it distracted somehow!!”

Yasuo ran towards Director Kelly who had been slashed, while keeping a close eye on the distance between himself and the longsword-wielding Shii.

“Yasuo! W-Wait! ...Ugh, fine!!”

The Shii turned its red eyes upon Yasuo who charged in recklessly, but Catalina barely managed to distract it by shooting a small fireball at it.

“Yasuo! What are you doing!? We can no longer do anything for her! Hurry up

and run away...”

“It’s okay! Yasu-kun might be able to save her! Catalina-san, please continue to keep that guy distracted!”

“Eh? Shouko, even you’re saying things like that... Hey, wait up! ”

Before Catalina could finish speaking, Shouko also ran into the courtyard as if following after Yasuo.

Shouko’s motive was clear.

She wanted to somehow help the children who were still petrified from fright in a corner of the courtyard to escape into the alleys.

However, no matter how you thought about it, that was impossible.

Most likely, Catalina’s magic would not be enough to restrain the Shii that looked like it was specialized for battle.

The ground stake and fireball she had used earlier were both uncomparably weaker than what she had been capable of back in the day, and if the Shii judged that she was harmless, it would ignore her and attack Yasuo and Shouko instead.

“I definitely... won’t let that happen!!”

Catalina desperately forced her body that was far past its prime to keep shooting fireballs at the Shii that stood on the roof.

However, she had barely shot out five or six fireballs before the Shii stopped considering her a threat.

The Shii ignored the seventh fireball that she shot out, and fixed its sight squarely on Yasuo who was on the ground beneath its feet.

“Yasuo! Shouko! Run away! There’s nothing more we can do!!”

“Please wait! It’s almost done!”

“What are you talking about!? Just hurry up and run! You’ll get yourselves killed!”

Catalina’s voice was close to a scream.

However Yasuo stubbornly refused to move from Director Kelly's side, and instead, Shouko spoke up.

"Yasu-kun! How much longer!?"

"Probably less than two minutes!!"

"I think I can hold out for a minute or so!"

".....Sorry!"

"You'd better take responsibility for whatever happens, okay!!?"

"Hey! What are the two of you planning...!?"

Shouko's gentle voice reached Catalina who was completely confused.

"Everyone, don't be afraid. That Onii-chan, Catalina-san, and I will definitely protect you."

She spoke in Japanese, a language that the children had no way of understanding.

However, strangely, the children stopped trembling.

And then.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!"

The next instant, Catalina saw something that she could scarcely believe.

A shadow leaped up from the courtyard to the roof with an explosive sound.

The hood was blown back by the pressure of the wind, and Shouko, with black flames gushing out of her eyes, wrists, ankles, and waist closed in on the the longsword-wielding Shii with the speed of a bullet.

"Shouko!?"

That was definitely Shouko.

At the same time, Catalina also realized something else.

The shape that the black flames took as they wrapped around Shouko looked familiar.

"Is that Baskelgarde's... 『Destroyer of Armies』, Orion?"

“How dare you do that to Obaa-chaaaaaaaan!!”

Along with the force of her jump, Shouko raised her right leg.

Her abilities might have been superhuman, but her movements were too straightforward to fight against a Shii that was specialized for battle.

She was going to get killed. Catalina gulped as she thought that.

“.....!”

However, for some reason, the longsword-wielding Shii stopped moving.

Although the Shii’s red, dead eyes were still turned upon Shouko, it froze in place as though it had been paralyzed, and Shouko kicked it in its side with every iota of strength she could muster.

The longsword-wielding Shii had no way of resisting the force of that kick, and it was sent flying into the wall of the neighboring building.

“You’re not going to go down just from that, right!? Bring it on! I will be your opponent! ”

Shouko, who had landed cleanly on the roof, shouted loudly at the Shii that was embedded in the wall.

Behind the flames that covered both her eyes, her pupils were glowing with the same red light as the Shii.

Catalina was shocked because she had no idea what had happened to turn Shouko into such a state, but there was something happening that was even more shocking.

“Catalina-san! I’ll leave the children to you! I’ll take care of Obaa-san...”

“Eh... Eh!?”

When Catalina looked towards Yasuo, she saw that Director Kelly, who was supposed to have been slashed by the Shii, was sitting up by herself with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

“W-What is going on...!?”

Catalina, who had finally entered the courtyard while keeping an eye on the Shii that was struggling while still stuck in the wall, looked between Director

Kelly, Yasuo, Shouko, and the children many times. Director Kelly herself kept looking between her body and Yasuo.

“You... Just what did you...”

Yasuo spoke concisely to the two women who were confused.

“I’m sorry, Catalina-san. The two of us were lying to you... Tatewaki-san!!”

“What!?”

“Obaa-san is fine! Can you somehow get one more hit in!?”

Yasuo said that while pointing at the Shii that had almost finished extricating itself from the wall, and Shouko lightly scratched her head.

“Is that really something you would ask a person who is supposed to be your girlfriend to do? You’re the worst!”

Shouko said that as she kicked off from the roof of the House of the Fireflies with a loud sound, and once again got close to the Shii that she had sent flying earlier.

Shouko looked into those red eyes with her own, and gave a small smile.

“Sorry, but this is something my boyfriend asked me to do.”

After saying that, she hit it in the center of its chest with so much force that it felt like her fist might pierce through.

“Ugh, that sensation doesn’t feel good at all.”

To avoid getting hit with a counterattack, Shouko spun around and jumped down to stand beside Yasuo.

Yasuo wasn’t sure if the phrase “on death’s door” applied to the Shii, but its movements had noticeably become dull. Yasuo looked up at it and took a deep breath and started singing the requiem without any hesitation.

“Yasuo... That... That song is...!”

Once the words of the requiem reached the Shii, it became completely motionless and its body started to flake off into particles of soot and disappear.

“.....I’m sorry, Catalina-san. We lied to you.”

Shouko's flames disappeared, and she started to breathe heavily with a slightly pale face.

"We weren't sure if you were really our ally or not, Catalina-san... So we were not able to tell you. We have a general idea about what's going on. About Ante Lande, the Shii and the things they have done, magic, and sorcery...."

"Shouko..."

"The fact is, we came to Ante Lande on our own accord to unravel the secret of the Shii that is within me. We were planning on keeping that a secret until we met the Magitech Knights in this town and asked for their protection, but..."

"It's not something we can keep a secret at the cost of people's lives."

The longsword-wielding Shii that had slashed Director Kelly had disappeared without a trace, and Yasuo said that after taking a deep breath.

"I've fought against the Shii several times... no, that's not quite right. I didn't actually fight them. I was just present on the field of battle. Just like what you saw earlier, I let other people do the fighting, and the only things that I am capable of are healing magic and singing the requiem. Even so, I felt that I had to protect these children, no matter what, because there was something that I could do to help them."

Saying that, Yasuo turned to properly face Director Kelly and Catalina.

"We are being targeted by someone who can control the Shii. There is a chance that we were the targets of this attack... even though it is strange for them to appear all over the town like this. In the beginning, I even suspected that the two of you were connected to the people who were targeting us. That's why I felt compelled to lie... I'm sorry. However, now I understand that there is no point in suspecting you."

The wound that Director Kelly received from the Shii was real.

If Catalina was in league with the Shii, she would not need to go to the trouble of pretending to help them escape or lend a hand in fighting against the Shii. She could have just disappeared after leaving the two of them behind at some place where the Shii would find them.

If all of this was according to the 『enemy's』 plan, then Yasuo and Shouko already had no cards left to play.

That is why there was no point in suspecting the two of them anymore.

In that case, when faced with what had occurred, the only thing he could do was to move according to his sense of justice that he had cultivated over his life so far.

“Have the two of you heard of anyone called Beatrice Heller or William Bareig?”

When Yasuo asked that question in a calm voice, Director Kelly and Catalina glanced at each other after hearing the name Beatrice.

“By Beatrice, do you mean the 『Foreman』?”

“You know her!?”

“Well, of course.”

Saying that, Catalina grimaced.

“I told you about them, didn't I? The pro-independence faction in the Gaz Commonwealth with nationalistic views. Beatrice Heller is in essence the leader of that third faction, the 『Carnelian of the Coal Mine』, that gained prominence in the Gaz Commonwealth with the aim of achieving a more clear-cut independence.”

“She's the one who has been sending the Shii to Japan!”

Shouko shouted that vigorously, and Director Kelly and Catalina looked even more confused.

“I did think that it was strange for Hideo's son and his friend to not know about anything, but... just how much of the situation do the two of you already understand?”

“At the very least, I think we know a bunch of details that people who are living ordinary lives in Ante Lande wouldn't know.”

Yasuo replied with a sombre expression on his face.

“It happened just recently. I received an 『official notice from the Foreman』

after many years.”

Saying that, Director Kelly hung her head with a mortified expression on her face.

“The message said to send over any information I came across regarding the Shii so that it could be used to negotiate for getting more support from the Gaz Commonwealth... so, that’s why I used the Magitech communication...”

“Wait, you told her about me...!?”

The only response Director Kelly gave in response to Shouko’s question was a groan of repentance.

However, that was enough to imagine what had happened.

After the case with Khalija, Yasuo and the others had roughly perceived that the 『Canelian of the Coal Mine』 was an organization that was tainted with evil, however the truth was that most of the people belonging to the organization were ignorant of the truth.

Just like what had happened today, Beatrice Heller was attempting sift through the information gathered from all the “clean” branches that were on the fringes of the organization to find more information about the 『Latch』, no matter how trivial it was.

Members of the organization who belonged to branches that had trouble keeping things running, such as the House of the Fireflies, would especially hand over any information without thinking too deeply about it for the sake of getting more support in the future.

To Director Kelly, the children who were dependent on the House of the Fireflies to survive were her primary concern, after all.

“.....I’m sorry. If only we had properly told you about ourselves to begin with...”

“No, you don’t need to apologize. You were correct in being cautious.”

On hearing Shouko’s apology, Catalina firmly shook her head.

“In the current state of Ante Lande, 『Hideo’s son』 and 『a human body in which a Shii resides』 are both sensitive topics that can cause an explosive

reaction. No matter what the reason, hiding the information you knew was not the wrong decision. Well, neither of us thought that the name of the 『Foreman』 would come up directly... however, it was good that I made preparations, just in case.”

“Eh?”

“It’s nothing. However, it looks like the two of you have more experience than us when it comes to fighting against the Shii. What should we do now?”

“.....!”

After looking at all the people gathered there, Yasuo spoke.

“It doesn’t matter whether they appeared spontaneously or someone is pulling the strings in the background. Now that so many Shii have appeared here, there is no such thing as a guaranteed safe place inside the town. Those things will easily appear indoors as well... however... that’s right.”

Yasuo looked surprised when he thought of something.

And despite coming up with the idea, he grimaced as if wondering if such a thing would actually be possible.

“Please wait for a while. Yasu-kun is really racking his brains at the moment.”

While silently wishing that Shouko wouldn’t say such unnecessary things, Yasuo considered the various things he had seen in Galedeite since he had arrived there.

“The bells”

“Did you think of something?”

“If we use those bells, I think we can make something of this situation. Catalina-san! Do you know where the sound of the bells that we heard before we had lunch is broadcasted from?”

“Are you talking about the sound we heard in the market? I’ve heard that they ring the bell in a watchtower that is jointly controlled by the Knights Division and the town council... but since it is important for the functioning of the whole town and maintaining public order, regular people are not told where that tower is located. That’s why, I don’t know either...”

Yasuo felt discouraged after hearing that answer from Catalina who looked perplexed.

“Everyone! Are you okay!?”

However, all the people gathered there were startled by the voice of the man who had suddenly appeared there, and they raised their heads.

On looking up, they saw Feigreid, who was white in the face, jump down from the roof of the House of the Fireflies. He confirmed that Director Kelly and the children were okay, and let out a small sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness, it looks like you’re all okay.”

“Catalina, this boy, and this girl came to protect us just in time.”

“I-I see.... Wait! That left eye is—!”

“...!!”

“P-Please wait! She isn’t a Shii...”

Yasuo panicked and tried to stop Feigreid who was startled after seeing the flames in Shouko’s left eye, but even before he could say anything, Catalina had moved to put herself in between Shouko and Feigreid.

“Second Lieutenant, there is something more important that I need to ask you to do for me.”

“Wha... Catalina-san, what is the meaning of this? Just who is that girl...”

“She a guest of mine from Japan who has come here from the other world. She is not a Shii. She is not someone your organization needs to be afraid of. More importantly, Shii have appeared within the town, correct? That’s why you came flying here, fearing that this place might have been attacked as well, right?”

“T-That’s true, but... Hang on!! From Japan!? What’s going on here!?”

“Due to the current situation, I’d like you to guide him to a certain place. He’s Yasuo Kenzaki, the son of the Hero Hideo.”

“.....Eh? Huh!? The son of the Hero Hideo!?”

Feigreid opened his eyes wide in shock and spun around to see the young

man who was standing behind him.

On the other hand, Yasuo too looked surprised as he had no idea what Catalina was talking about.

※

“It’s about time for that to happen, don’t you think?”

On that day, a certain notice had been circulated among the army personnel stationed at a checkpoint belonging to Resteria, located at the border between the Gaz Commonwealth and the Resteria Kingdom.

The commanding officer for that particular day sat in the checkpoint building, looking bored as he flipped through the reports and replied to his subordinate who had asked that question.

“One of the VIPs from the Capital is going to cross over to the Gaz side. I heard that their destination is Galedeite.”

“Yeah, about that ‘one person’ part. I don’t get why it’s just one VIP. I don’t know who they are, but you’d think they would have at least one Magitech Knight as an escort.”

“No, it really seems that they intend to come alone... Hmm?”

At that moment, an alarm went off indicating that a an object using mana to fly was approaching the checkpoint at high speed from the Resteria side of the border.

“Oi, is there really someone stupid enough to try and cross the border from the air without permission in this day and age!?”

“Anti-flight Sorcery Division! Prepare to intercept... Hey, hang on, that is...!”

The commanding officer who had been looking through a telescope out of the window of the checkpoint stood shocked with his mouth agape for a moment, and then hurriedly ordered for the alarm to be stopped.

“Open the border gates! Open the border gates!”

“What!? There’s no way that Gaz will allow someone to enter their territory through the air—”

“And I’m telling you, they have permission!”

“Haah!?”

The airship approached the checkpoint.

“I’m heeeeeeeere!!”

That flying object, which turned out to be a single Magitech Knight, approached at a high speed and crossed right over the gate on the ground meant to prevent people from crossing the border without permission.

Strangely enough, that person’s arrival coincided perfectly with the time mentioned in the notice sent to the border patrol, regarding the “VIP’s arrival.”

“That was...”

After the Magitech Knight flew past them, a single sheet of paper came fluttering down from the sky.

The Magitech Knight had realized that they were under observation through a telescope despite the great speed at which they was traveling, and immediately pulled out that paper. The commanding officer remembered that person’s face and gave a bitter smile.

“.....Seriously, what a joke... Umm, let’s see. This is the first time I’ve seen one of these as well. It has the Royal Seal to authenticate that person as an emergency special envoy... The person who passed by is from the Kingdom’s Knights Division, from the army in the capital. Let’s see, the name is...”

At that moment, they heard the alarm from the checkpoint on the Gaz side that was a short distance away from the border on the other side, and the sound carried to them faintly over the wind.

Most likely there was an uproar on their side as well.

“It looks like we are going to get scolded for this, the permit notwithstanding.”

The commanding officer slumped his shoulders in resignation, and then turned to look up at the sky that the Magitech Knight had flown through.

“I wonder why she was in such a hurry on a peaceful day like this with good

weather. Really, I'll never understand what the VIPs are thinking."

※

The tower to which Feigreid led Yasuo, Shouko, and Catalina looked almost identical to the tower that they had climbed earlier.

"There are other 『Bell Towers』 apart from this one as well, and we use a different one each day."

Since the equipment was in charge of keeping time for the entire town, it was only natural that they went to that much trouble.

"Do all of them have broadcasting equipment?"

"Yes, they do. Each tower has its own Magitech Frameworks, and the person in charge just moves the bells each time we switch to a different tower."

Apparently, the town council were responsible for the overseeing the bells, and the Knights Division were responsible for getting them to the assigned place safely.

"Still, is something like that really possible...?"

Feigreid asked that question uneasily, and Yasuo, whose expression looked even more uneasy, answered him.

"It's not a matter of whether I can do it or not, we have no choice but to try. If there is someone who is overseeing this entire incident, then that person might do something to get in our way. Feigreid-san, you have to do your best to protect this tower."

"U-Understood..."

Although Feigreid had broken out into a cold sweat, he looked like he had prepared himself and led the way into the tower. Meanwhile, Yasuo looked like he was not prepared at all and his breathing was shallow.

"It's over here..."

After Feigreid ordered the soldiers who were guarding the facility to stand down, Yasuo entered a room that had many strange looking machines installed in it and his anxiety reached the maximum level.

If his hypothesis didn't work out after going to all this trouble, not only would it be embarrassing for him, it might reflect badly on Feigreid as well.

Since Catalina had mediated on Yasuo's behalf to get them this far, she might not get out of it unscathed either.

"Yasu-kun!"

"Ueeeh!? W-What is it..."

However, Shouko unexpectedly slapped him hard on his back as though she had seen through his worry, causing Yasuo to start coughing.

"Be more confident! I'm sure you can do it!!"

Shouko said that forcefully to Yasuo who had tears in his eyes.

"If it doesn't work out, I'll apologize to everyone along with you! Do your best! The kids from the House of the Fireflies are counting on you!"

"Are you trying to cheer me up or put more pressure on me? Make up your mind!"

Yasuo said that with a bitter smile and looked around the 『broadcasting room』.

Hanging from the ceiling were three bells that looked smaller than he had expected.

There were four trumpet-like things that looked like the speakers of a gramophone, surrounding those bells.

A magical pattern appeared to have been carved into the floor, and Yasuo had no way of understanding its purpose.

That pattern looked identical to the Magitech Frameworks that he had seen inside the Techno Weapon Castor in the past, and perhaps this entire room could be considered to be one large Techno Weapon.

Looking closely, he saw that the bells had characters and diagrams engraved into them as well, and it appeared that the system was not as simple as just hitting the bells to make them ring.

"Hey, this is pretty nice! It kind of looks like a recording studio!"

“Seriously, can you just stop talking for a while!?”

“Would you like for us to leave the room?”

“I honestly have no idea what will happen. You can wait where ever you want, just be ready to take action no matter what happens.”

“I understand. Leave it to me. I still have a little power left to spare.”

“.....To be honest, I don't like the idea of making you fight, Tatewaki-san.”

“It's a little late for that.”

Shouko's smile hinted at mixed feelings, and she spoke.

“Use whatever you have to. You can worry about the source of the problem and understanding the situation later. That said, it's not like I'm not scared or anything, so the things you have to take responsibility for are rapidly growing, okay?”

“Yeah, I got it... wait, what!?”

Yasuo had still not resolved himself, but in order to trick himself into believing that he was ready, he took a large breath and shouted out in a loud voice on purpose.

“Feigreid-san, let's start!”

“Understood... In that case...”

After Yasuo signalled that he was ready, Feigreid pressed his hand against a certain spot on the wall and activated the Magitech Frameworks.

At the same time, the four trumpets that surrounded Yasuo and the bells started to let out a humming sound.

Feigreid extended his hand to let Yasuo know that the requirements had already been set in motion.

Yasuo did his best to calm his pounding heart, coughed once to clear his throat, and opened his mouth.

The 『Requiem』 sung in Yasuo's resonant voice was transmitted throughout the town via the Magitech Frameworks, the Magitech equipment, and speakers that were mounted on the utility poles in the town.

The speakers had been placed at calculated locations to ensure that the sound of the bells would reach all parts of the town, and now the sound of the requiem penetrated every single building, reached every single alley, no matter how small, and perhaps even extended beyond the walls of the town as well.

“T-This is...”

Feigreid, who was operating the 『broadcasting room』, spoke up in a shocked voice.

Light extended from under Yasuo’s feet, and that light spread across the floor, up the walls, and the bells that hung from the ceiling.

The three bells started to tremble in concert with Yasuo’s singing, and the trumpets that picked up his voice transmitted it all over the town without any loss.

“Shouko! Look!”

Catalina, who had been standing near the door of the broadcasting room and looking outside the tower through a window, gestured for Shouko to come closer and look as well.

Shouko ran towards the window, and she immediately understood what was happening as well.

At first glance, it looked like fingers of black fire were extending upwards from all over the town.

However, on looking closely, it was apparent that they were actually comprised of the soot-like substance that appeared when the Shii were being sent off with the requiem.

In a short amount of time, the number of pillars of soot started to increase rapidly, from ten to twenty.

Of course, it meant that the number of Shii that had appeared in the town was just that high, but Catalina could not hide her shock on seeing that spectacle.

It was said that even higher-ranking clerics from the Church of the Divine King could send off no more than three Shii at once.

However, it was unheard of for one person's song to send off ten or twenty Shii at once, even if that person was borrowing the massive power of large-scale Magitech Frameworks.

"Catalina-san! Over there!"

On the roof of a building a few dozen meters away from the tower, they could see a Shii that was falling over in a strange posture.

It was hard to tell as most of its body was hidden by the black soot that was rising up, but it looked like the body of the Shii was wracked with spasms.

As the Shii continued to convulse, a Magitech Knight appeared from somewhere and delivered the finishing blow.

As soon as it was struck, the Shii turned entirely into soot and vanished, and the Magitech Knight took a moment to listen closely to Yasuo's requiem, and despite looking mystified about what was going on, he flew off in search of other Shii.

"Is he keeping the Shii from moving?"

"There's no doubt about it. Yasu-kun did the same thing in Japan, after all."

"H-How is he able to stay on his feet after doing that!? Something like this can't be achieved with an ordinary amount of mana, you know!?"

"It seems he doesn't know the reason either. Even the Magitech Knight who taught him how to use magic found it incomprehensible."

"I wonder... if it due to his heritage after all."

"I don't think that's it. It might sound bad to put it this way, but Yasu-kun's uncles and aunts are apparently ordinary people."

"You're talking about how they are ordinary by the standards of Japan, right? Hideo and Madoka as well..."

"That doesn't matter. Yasu-kun is just Yasu-kun. In the first place, Yasu-kun is terrible at the things that Oji-san and Oba-san are good at. I'm sure that this is unrelated to them."

"But in that case, what is the explanation for this outrageous situation...?"

“It’s just like I said earlier. You can worry about causes and explanations later. However, if you absolutely must have an explanation for this, Catalina-san, I think I know the likely reason.”

“What is it?”

Shouko glanced back at the broadcasting room and spoke happily.

“Yasu-kun is gentle, loves to sing, and has put a lot of effort into it. I think that’s all there is to it.”

“.....”

Catalina looked disappointed for just a moment, and then she glanced at the broadcasting room and let out a sigh.

“Just to make sure, what you told me about the two of you being lovers is...”

“It was a lie. Or rather, I am waiting for his reply.”

“.....What a horrible man.”

“Seriously.”

At that moment, the two of them realized that the pillars of soot that they had seen through the window of the tower had largely disappeared.

Perhaps that meant that all the Shii that had appeared in the town had been defeated and sent off.

“Perhaps we should go and tell them.”

“That’s right. It might be putting a fair amount of strain on his body, after all...”

It happened the moment after the two of them turned away from the window to talk to Yasuo and Feig Reid.

“Eh.”

“Oh?”

All of a sudden, the interior of the tower went pitch black.

It was as if something had eclipsed the sun.

And then, when they turned around, Shouko and Catalina saw something

unbelievable.

It was a deep red in color, and was big enough to fill their entire field of vision outside the window.

It was impossible to immediately realize what that was.

The only thing Shouko and Catalina understood was that they were looking at something that could not possibly exist.

Yasuo had certainly said it before they had carried out this plan.

If the people who were working for Beatrice Heller had wormed their way into the deepest parts of the Gaz Commonwealth, they would easily be able to find out the location of the person who was using the town's broadcasting facilities to send off all the Shii that had appeared.

It was possible that they might send an assassin to interfere with the requiem.

That is why he had told Feigreid, Shouko, and Catalina to not let down their guard and be ready to fight.

However.

No one would have been able to predict that something like this would show up.

“Feigreid-san!! Take care of Yasu-kun!!”

Shouko's scream coincided almost perfectly with the tower that housed the broadcasting system being broken in half by an enormous power.

※

The fact that she had been able to pick up Catalina and jump out of the window in time was nothing short of a miracle.

Ever since she had first landed in that forest after coming to Ante Lande, the black flames of the Shii had saved her repeatedly.

The flames that burned at her wrists, ankles, and waist granted Shouko superhuman strength, but just superhuman strength and stamina would not be enough for Shouko, who had no real experience when it came to martial arts or battle, to move in such a manner.

“W-What is that...!?”

Shouko whispered in a dazed manner while still carrying Catalina.

It was just way too massive.

It's height was equal to that of the tower in which the broadcasting room was located.

Furthermore, it carried a spear that was even longer, so long in fact that trying to guess its length felt like an exercise in futility.

It had four legs that trampled on the town and left only rubble in their wake.

It had no features in common with any creature Shouko knew about, but was this also a Shii that was based on some creature that was already dead?

If it was a shii, then what kind of creature was it based on?

It was a mass of black flames that had destroyed a fifty meter tall tower with a single swing of its spear, and had trampled over one district of the town.

That massive creature that looked roughly like a centaur was most definitely not something that a person could fight against.

“Yasu-kun! Feigreid-san!”

Shouko raised her voice until it was almost a scream, but due to the sound of the crumbling rubble, her voice did not even reach until the location where the tower had been standing.

If this Shii had appeared in the same fashion as the human-type Shii, that is, by bursting out from underground, just how much damage had it done on the surface just by appearing?

“T-That's right, W-What about the House of the Fireflies....!?”

Catalina groaned while still being carried by Shouko and responded.

“It is in a district that just narrowly avoided being trampled under that thing's feet... But when dealing with something that large, being one or two blocks away is meaningless... I can't believe it, that is...”

“Do you know what that thing is!?”

“The Hideo Holy Sword river was created during the fight between that guy and Hideo’s group.”

Even that idiotic name couldn’t not help to soften the current atmosphere.

“Demon General Balor. The number of people he killed during the war against Demon King Kaul is among the highest... Aah... For the thing everyone in the world feared the most to happen at a time like this...”

Ever since the Shii appeared, most of them that had been spotted around the world were humanoid, although there had been reports that some of them had been shaped like animals as well.

From the testimonies of the soldiers who were originally from Torjesso, it was discovered that the Shii had basically the same features and level of ability that the people that they were based on had when they were still alive, and there had always been a concern that demons might be reborn as Shii as well.

However, this demon Balor=Shii posed far too big a threat to be the first example of such an occurrence.

If it was allowed to roam free for even as little as an hour, it would be able to reduce the whole of Galedeite to a plain, flat land.

No matter how the battle had progressed, judging by the fact that the Hideo Holy Sword River had been created as a result of that battle in the past, it was clear that it was a fierce fight that greatly damaged the surroundings.

It was a demon that had given the Hero Hideo such a hard time back when he was at his strongest, so even if it was a Shii now, just how were they supposed to defeat it?

“This... might be impossible...”

Judging by the time it had appeared, it must have also heard Yasuo’s requiem.

However, as far as Shouko could see, the requiem had no effect on Balor=Shii at all.

Its resistance to the requiem and the holy attribute must be incomparably more powerful compared to a humanoid Shii.

In any case, it was not an opponent that Shouko even dared to approach with

her current level of strength.

However.

“.....Ah.”

It must have been the work of a truly evil god, or perhaps it was just something unavoidable.

Balor=Shii met Shouko's gaze.

It was not a coincidence or a mistake.

Balor=Shii's eye, which was larger than a person, was looking straight at Shouko.

And then, the demon pointed its massive spear directly at her.

It moved in a very unhurried manner. However, there was no way that she could run away from it.

Even with the flames of the Shii activated, Shouko was still frozen in fear and unable to move.

While casting his shadow over her, Balor stabbed the spear towards her without even giving her time to scream.

“.....?”

However.

“Uwaaaaa...?”

However there was no destruction, impact, or death, and the strong wind she felt around her body raised a cloud of dust from the surrounding rubble.

“S-Shouko...”

When Shouko heard Catalina's voice, she opened her eyes that she had inadvertently shut before.

“Hiii!”

The first thing she saw was the spear that was about as thick as a skyscraper held motionless in the air, and her gaze once again met that of Balor's.

She had no idea what had happened.

She didn't understand what was going on, but was this instinct coming from her, or the Shii that was hiding inside her body?

She instinctively understood that it was not a coincidence.

The same thing had happened with the longsword-wielding Shii at the House of the Fireflies as well.

For some reason, the Shii were unable to attack Shouko.

"Stop treating me like I'm one of you!"

There was no other explanation for it.

Not just Director Kelly, but a lot of people in Galedeite had been attacked by the Shii.

It was easy to imagine why she should be the only person who could not be attacked by them.

It must be because she was the 『Latch』, although she had no idea what that meant.

"Even so, I can still use this!"

"Shouko?"

Shouko put Catalina down on the ground, clenched her fist, and spoke in a loud voice.

"Catalina-san... Catalina-san, please go and help the people in the House of the Fireflies to evacuate. I'm going to save Yasu-kun!"

"Wait! What are you talking about!? In this sort of situation, if you recklessly charge out in front of him, there is nothing you can do!!"

"There is! You saw it too, right? The Shii can't attack me!! Even that massive thing is holding back! It would be a waste not to use this!"

"B-But..."

"If I go down there and run around his legs, he won't be able to move because he might crush me if he does, and as long as I'm there, he can't attack! I can take my time and rescue Yasu-kun easily, right before the enemy's eyes!"

As Shouko spoke, she felt the flames around her ankles grow one size bigger.

“I’ll use anything that I can! Even if it happens to be a Shii!”

“Wait, stop right there!”

“I won’t wait! We’re running out of time...”

“That’s not what I’m saying! Even if the Shii won’t attack you, the crumbling rubble and fires are still dangerous. If you’re going to go anyway...”

Catalina stuck her hand inside her robe with an expression that said she had more or less given up.

“...then go after you’ve completed all possible preparations!!”

※

“Ugh...”

“You’re awake... ugh... Thank goodness.”

“Ah... Feigreid-san...?”

Yasuo’s vision was blurred and the only thing he heard was Feigreid’s voice. He used all his energy to sit up.

Yasuo eventually looked through the dust-laden air and spotted Feigreid lying on the ground near some rubble, but he was in no condition to rush over to Feigreid’s side.

When he tried to stand, a sharp pain ran through his right leg and he collapsed to the ground along with a cry.

“W-What happened...?”

“The tower... collapsed... I somehow managed... to save you... But I made a mistake.”

“Feigreid-san...”

Without even knowing why his right leg was hurting, Yasuo looked over to where Feigreid was lying down and was shocked.

A blood-soaked piece of wood was sticking out of Feigreid’s abdomen.

Yasuo was not sure if he was pierced by some shrapnel when the tower

collapsed or if there was some other reason for it, but it was obvious that Feigreid, whose whole body was covered in blood, had no strength left to move.

“P-Please wait! I’ll heal you right away...”

However, Yasuo had the ability to use healing magic.

As long as Feigreid hadn’t lost too much blood, it should be possible to save his life. That is what Yasuo thought.

“Ugh... dammit!!”

When Yasuo looked closer, he saw that his right foot was bent at an impossible angle.

The moment he noticed that, he was assailed by a sense of pain strong enough almost knock him senseless.

At this rate, it would be impossible for him to heal Feigreid.

If he didn’t heal himself first, he wouldn’t even be able to move through the rubble to Feigreid’s location.

However, Yasuo noticed something else as well.

The surroundings were strangely dark.

The midday sun was being blocked out by something.

Yasuo forced himself to look away from his ankle that was screaming with pain and he looked up at the sky. What he saw there made him unconsciously hold his breath.

“Wha.....”

It was a giant monster.

That was the first description that ran through his mind.

Even though it was so massive, it was still moving in a coordinated fashion..

That alone was enough for fear to take hold of his entire body.

It was impossible.

There was no way that something like this could exist.

Moreover, those black flames. And that red eye.

Was this thing a Shii?

“It seems like... it was the one who destroyed the tower... Haha... You’ve got to be kidding me... How are we supposed to... Fight a monster like this.....”

Feigreid’s voice had lost all traces of vitality.

He had been overcome with despair as well.

The giant creature that was staring down towards them only had to take one step forward, and they would be squished to a pulp.

Despite that, the two of them were not even able to run away from this place.

After that, Yasuo and Feigreid were cast even further into shadow by an object that suddenly appeared in their field of vision.

“A... spear?”

Yasuo, who was sitting near the creature’s feet was not able to immediately realize it, but this thing was carrying a weapon.

Looking at the absurd length of that weapon, Yasuo instinctively understood.

This was the creature that was truly responsible for creating the Hideo Holy Sword River.

.....This is insane.

As this line of reasoning suddenly floated up in his mind, Yasuo felt like he was going mad and started to laugh.

And then, the giant lifted one foot as if to stomp on Yasuo and Feigreid.

However the two of them couldn’t move a single step, and all they could do was to struggle fruitlessly.

Despite the fact that death was closing in on him, perhaps his sense of danger had been numbed by the all too unrealistic sight in front of him, Yasuo did not feel as afraid as he had back when he was attacked by the Shii and William Bareig in Tokorozawa.

He could not use the holy sword summoning to summon his father here, and

nobody would come to save them.

“.....This is just insane.”

That phrase he muttered at the end were going to be his last words.

“I am... the one who nurtures the vast lands.”

Or at least, that was supposed to be the case.

“Grow, ye sprouts! Thaw, ye snow! Awaken, ye which sleeps in the depths of winter! Holy Bow of Water, Pomona! Answer my call and take form!”

There was no impact, and the only thing Yasuo saw was a large amount of light cutting through the sky.

Yasuo unintentionally closed his eyes against the light that seemed to be bright enough to sear his eyes.

“Uwaah!!”

When he opened his eyes again, he felt a spray of water against his face that felt like a light drizzle, and Yasuo let out a groan.

At the same time, he heard the sound of something massive falling to the ground and saw that the giant creature that had been moving towards him had fallen heavily on top of the rubble.

“Wha...”

Even Feigreid, who had prepared himself for the worst, was completely taken aback, and the two of them looked up into the sky.

The sun was once again visible now that the giant had fallen over, and a dark speck swooped down towards Yasuo with the sun at its back.

Compared to the giant, that person was far too small, however they appeared in that place with a sound filled with vitality.

Golden hair that sparkled in that town filled with death and rubble.

The bow that she held in her hands was releasing a divine aura, and nobody who saw it could deny the overflowing amounts of vitality and mana that it gave off.

And more than anything else, that dignified voice that he had grown accustomed to over these past few months.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting!!”

As he looked up at her hair ornament that was shaped like a flower, glittering in the light of the sun, Yasuo called out her name with an unbelieving expression on his face.

“Diana...?”

“Yes!!”



It was Diana.

Dianaze Krone had arrived, wearing the uniform of Resteria's Magitech Knights that Yasuo had grown used to seeing.

However, what she held in her hands were not the standard Techno Weapons of Resteria's Knights Division, Castor and Pollux.

It was a weapon Yasuo had never seen before, and it looked like a flowering branch had been used as it is to make a bow and arrow.

"I guess the day we feared has finally come. Demon General Balor... The day when one of the demons from Demon King Kaul's army was resurrected as a Shii!"

"Diana... Just what... why are you..."

"We can talk later. Yasuo, I will buy you some time. Please heal your leg and save that Magitech Knight from Gaz."

"I-Impossible, there's no way... you can face something that massive by yourself."

No matter how superhuman Diana's strength was, that was only in comparison to Yasuo's own strength.

Feigreid notwithstanding, none of the Magitech Knights from Gaz had been able attack that giant, and Yasuo could not believe that Diana would be able to face it by herself.

However, there was no hint of doubt in Diana's eyes.

"I have no choice but to do it. I am... I am also a Hero's daughter, after all!!"

"Diana!! Uwaah!"

Diana drew the bow without nocking an arrow, and leaped into the air with a thunderous sound.

Before her was the massive spear that was held aloft.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!"

The next instant, Diana gave a yell loud enough to overpower Yasuo who was on the ground, and the overwhelmingly powerful blast of magical energy that she fired from that empty bow forced the spear back along with its wielder.

“I’m not done yet!!”

Balor=Shii’s shoulder was wide open after its attack was repulsed, and Diana shot several arrows of light at it in quick succession.

Balor=Shii tried to intimidate Diana with a bloodcurdling scream, but perhaps it could not withstand the power of those arrows, as it no longer attempted to raise its spear.

However, the characteristic ability of the Shii was their power to steal the hearts of living creatures.

As Diana was struggling with inertial forces while flying through the air, a red beam of light was released towards her from Balor=Shii’s red eye that was easily larger than her height.

“Diana!!”

Yasuo, who had once had been exposed to that attack from a terrifying enemy, shouted in alarm, but it looked like timing with which the beam was fired made it impossible to evade.

However, miraculously, an even stronger power appeared to interfere with that attack.

“I’ve had enough of your rampaaaaaage!”

A frighteningly large object appeared between Diana and Balor=Shii with the speed of a bullet.

Shouko, clinging to the back of the scaled dragon, had appeared as if to protect Diana from that red light.

“Shouko!? Watch out!”

By the time Diana noticed Shouko, the red light was right in front of her..

A chill ran down Diana’s spine as she thought that they were both going to be swallowed up by that red light.

『.....!』

Balor=Shii closed its massive eye along with a roar, and the red light dispersed into the sky an instant before it hit Shouko and the scaled dragon.

“Diana-san, the Shii can’t attack me so don’t worry, more importantly if you have anything up your sleeve now is the time!!”

Shouko shouted that in a single breath from the back of the scaled dragon as it passed by Diana while maintaining the momentum of its arrival.

Diana felt that she had someone other than Shouko riding on the back of the scaled dragon as well, but she couldn’t spare the time to confirm that.

She could not afford to lose this opportunity where Balor=Shii stood with its eye closed and its spear was out of position.

Diana accurately made use of the momentary gap that Shouko had created by risking her life.

As Balor=Shii moved sluggishly trying to regain its stance, Diana poured every last drop of mana she had into her bow.

“Disappear!!”

She fired the arrow directly into the center of Balor=Shii’s chest while it was off-balance.

“Guh!!”

Yasuo groaned when he was hit by a portion of that thunderous sound and shockwave, but when he opened his eyes again, what he saw was a sight that was even more unimaginable than Balor=Shii itself.

“Eeeehh?”

That giant body that had been strong enough to cleave the tower in two had been blasted into the air.

The force of Diana’s arrow of light had been strong enough to knock Balor=Shii off its feet and send it flying to the plains beyond the town walls.

“Yasuo!! Hurry up with the healing!!”

“Ah... Right!”

After shouting to Yasuo who was just blankly staring into the sky, Diana flew off in pursuit of the Shii that she had just sent flying.

It had been less than two days since Yasuo last saw her. Just what had happened to Diana in that time to enable her to easily blow away the giant Shii that was a symbol of despair beyond the town walls using some power that Yasuo had never seen before?

“Ouch!!”

Along with that doubt, Yasuo’s body was suddenly overcome by the fact that he was still alive, and his broken leg sent a complaint in the form of a sharp pain.

“Dammit... This pain feels entirely different from having my stomach pierced through. Gaaaaah!”

Yasuo somehow managed to set his ankle back in the proper position, and less than a minute after applying healing magic to it, his ankle returned to normal.

“Ugh.....”

Since he had used the requiem and healing magic continuously without taking a break, he felt dizzy due to lack of mana.

However, Feigreid was close by, on the verge of death.

In order to share what had happened here with the people of this world, the presence of Feigreid, who was a Magitech Knight of Gaz, was indispensable.

More importantly, for the sake of Director Kelly and the children of the House of the Fireflies who were waiting while being worried about him, Feigreid definitely could not be allowed to die.

“A-Are you still alive?”

“...Somehow. Yasuo... what just happened...?”

“Well, that is... Ah.”

Feigreid, who unexpectedly didn’t look too worse for wear, asked that question, and just as Yasuo was about to answer, they heard a dull sound from

somewhere far away.

When they looked in that direction, they saw that the left hand of the giant shii had been ripped off and it landed on the bank of the Hideo Holy Sword River.

“Haha... I’m just as surprised as you are. I honestly have no idea what just happened... but I’m sure that.....”

That chant, that had similar wording to the chants used to summon the Holy Sword of the Wind, Liutberga, and the Holy Staff of Fire, Marlowe.

“Perhaps... she is the true hero that the current Ante Lande needs. However, the truth is...”

Dianaze, daughter of Swordmaster Alexei Krone and the Great Sorceress, Erijina Radagast.

If you just looked at her lineage and ability, she was a thoroughbred who was on an entirely different level compared to Kenzaki Yasuo.

He didn’t know the reason or the circumstances behind it, but it looked like she had been granted a power that was on the same level as the Holy Sword.

“Some like me probably has no right to say such a thing, but I’m a little worried about her.”

Unable to slow down in time, the scaled dragon that had shot past Diana at a high speed landed with the same force and tumbled across the ground that was strewn with rubble.

“Kyaaaaa!”

“Uwaaaaah!”

Shouko, who was enveloped in the flames of the Shii, managed to catch Catalina who was thrown into the air, and somehow managed to land on the ground without any injuries while hearing the sound of the scaled dragon crashing into something and destroying it in the background.

“I-I thought I was going to die!”

“T-That’s my line!”

The two of them sank to the ground while shouting at each other.

“Catalina-san! Yasu-kun and Feigreid-san managed to survive! Let’s hurry back!”

“Wait! Are you just going to leave that scaled dragon in that sort of condition!?”

When Shouko looked in that direction, she saw that the scaled dragon had crashed into some rubble and was struggling pitifully to free itself.

It didn’t appear to be seriously injured, but it probably wouldn’t be able to fly again right away.

“Also, that Shii is no longer inside the town! Even if we hurry to their side, we have no means by which we can heal them. Thanks to that Magitech Knight, they should not be any danger of dying right away! Shouko! You’re not exactly in perfect condition either, so calm down!”

Hearing Catalina’s rebuke, Shouko took a single deep breath to try and calm herself down.

At that instant, they felt the tremors caused by some large object falling to the ground far away, and Shouko turned in that direction, and saw that Balor=Shii had been blown all the way to the edge of the forest.

“Diana-san is amazing... But how did she know that we were here?”

From what Shouko had heard about Diana’s battle strength from Yasuo and Khalija, she was certainly far more talented than average, but even so she should not have such an incredible amount of power.

Also, despite the fact that Shouko was ignorant of the details related to the military situation of Ante Lande, even she could tell that sending Balor=Shii flying to a location beyond the town walls was not something that could be achieved with a normal level of power.

And most importantly, she was not able to understand how Diana had arrived at this place, as if she had pinpointed Yasuo’s location.

Shouko’s question was soon answered by the person who was beside her.

“Just like how the two of you were on your guard with me, I too was scared of

whatever brought the two of you here. Especially after I learned that Yasuo was Hideo's son. That's why, I contacted them last night."

"Contacted them... Ah!"

Shouko remembered that Catalina had said something about making contact with someone when they were in front of the House of the Fireflies.

"You should have seen how worried she was when I contacted her and said, 『I've picked up a boy who looks exactly like Hideo, do you people have anything to do with that?』Despite how I look, I am still a famous painter, and I have had a long relationship with the people who saved this world along with Hideo."

Catalina pointed at the light that was piercing Balor=Shii and continued to speak.

"That light is from the Holy Bow of Water, Pomona. It is the bow that the Great Sorceress Erijina Radagast used when she fought against Demon King Kaul. However, it looks like the person who is using it now is not Erize, although I only caught a glimpse of her from far away..."

"Diana-san is the daughter of that person called Erijina."

".....I see, so that's how it is. So it was Resteria that brought you two here after all."

".....Ah."

"You don't need to worry about hiding things from me at this late hour. I can guess that all of you were traveling to Ante Lande in secret, but due to some trouble, just the two of you ended up landing in the Gaz Commonwealth. From what I can see, Erize's daughter was the one who asked you to travel to Ante Lande. Am I right?"

".....T-That is..."

"In any case, we can talk about that in length if that girl manages to defeat Balor=Shii. For now, we should get away from here and find some shelter. Shouko, could you scout around the surroundings, just in case? There might be some Magitech Knight who mistakes you for a threat, or a Shii that has not yet been sent off in the area."

At that moment, the two of them heard the roar of an animal from behind them.

The scaled dragon had managed to crawl out of the rubble, and it was glaring down at them unhappily.

Catalina started to pacify it by playing on the pipe that she pulled out of her robe, and spoke to Shouko.

“As I thought, it won’t be able to fly again right away. We are pretty close to the House of the Fireflies, so let’ begin with guiding Director Kelly and the others to some place where the Magitech Knights will be able to protect them. After that, we can go search for Yasuo and Second Lieutenant Feig Reid. Let us believe in Yasuo’s powers of healing. Is that okay?”

“.....Yes, I understand.”

Frankly, Shouko wanted to go save Yasuo as soon as possible.

However, abandoning the people in the House of the Fireflies was also not an option.

“I should probably get used to this power a little more, anyway.”

The increase in her power caused by the Shii’s flames was still in effect, and Shouko could tell that the more she used that power, the longer she was able to maintain it.

When she thought that more humanoid Shii might appear in the town, she felt like testing the limits of that strength.

“Ahh... It looks like I’ve been completely influenced by this stuff as well.”

Had she always had such a combative mindset?

Despite the fact that it was a serious situation where people’s lives were on the line, Shouko felt it oddly amusing and couldn’t resist smiling.

“I wonder if Tatewaki-san and Catalina-san are okay. They went flying off at such a high speed, after all.”

“I’m not sure either... I had no idea scaled dragons could fly that fast, so I really can’t say for sure...”

Yasuo was doing his best to heal Feigreid after pulling out the piece of wood that had pierced through his abdomen and applying pressure to reduce the flow of blood.

As Yasuo healed him, he could feel that Feigreid's overflowing vitality that probably came from his rigorous training as a Magitech Knight had already brought him out of a critical condition.

"Is that good enough.... I feel like I'm going to throw up...."

"Ah!"

As soon as Yasuo judged that Feigreid was no longer in immediate danger, his entire body was assailed by a sense of fatigue.

As Yasuo was about to crumple to the floor, Feigreid hurriedly put his hand out to support Yasuo.

".....Thank you very much. My life was saved by the son of the Hero Hideo... This will be something I can take pride in for the rest of my life."

"Haha, if you want to put it that way, then you are the one who saved me from the tower when it was destroyed, right? If anything, you should take pride in that instead...."

"No. In the end, I was not able to let you escape from that Shii. I'm sure a large number of people lost their lives as well... Despite being a Magitech Knight, I feel like I've only shown you such worthless things."

Yasuo was not one to rashly say that that wasn't the case, and Feigreid probably wasn't expecting to hear that either.

"And besides, the one who saved you, Yasuo, was...."

Feigreid stood up while supporting Yasuo, and gazed at the light that shone far away from the town wall.

"...that beautiful Magitech Knight."

"Umm, Feigreid-san..."

"Please, call me Feig."

".....Feig-san. Can you please take me to where she is... to where Diana is? I'm

sure that the fight will be over soon.”

※

Pomona, The Holy Bow of Water that Diana had received from her mother, converted her mana into far more powerful attacks than a regular Techo Weapon could hope to achieve, and Diana used that power to repeatedly chip away at the body of the Shii which only had its size as a strong point.

However, Diana’s body started to feel the strain from the amount of mana that was consumed.

“I am still... far too weak!”

Diana shot out arrows of light from Pomona while thinking about what had happened during the past couple of days.

“My heart, body, and sorcery are still far too weak!!”

In a way, she was just venting her anger.

“Whether it is as a Magitech Knight... or as a regular person... At this rate, I won’t be able to protect the people who are dear to me!”

A portion of Balor=Shii’s body or flames were blown away every time Diana fired an arrow from Pomona, and finally, that massive spear fell to the ground and disappeared.

“If I... If we don’t get stronger, Ante Lande won’t...”

Diana’s eyes were filled with hatred as she looked straight into Balor=Shii’s massive red eye.

“...be able to protect Yasuo’s hometown!!”

The falling star that was created just above the ground pierced through Balor=Shii’s skull, and that massive body finally collapsed completely flat on the plains.

“Haa.... Haa.... Haa...”

Diana, who landed next to Balor=Shii while breathing roughly, glared hatefully at its corpse.

“Even after death you still appear to cause harm to people... Just exactly

where do all of you come from...”

『Guuu.... Guaaaaaah』

The only things that came from the giant mouth of the Shii that had once been a Demon General were groans and a foul smell.

“Ugh....”

Diana instinctively wrinkled her nose at the smell of rot, but when she looked at the red eye that was steadily growing dimmer, she made a twisted expression as though she was sad.

“Who would do something like this, and why.....”

Even a demon from ancient times that she had only ever heard about in legends would not want to seek out another death after already dying once.

Why do they treat life so cruelly?

Who was responsible for this?

“It will take a fair amount of time to answer that question.”

“...!?”

It happened in an instant.

Balor=Shii, the sky, the ground, the river, the forest, the town, and everything else had their color stripped away and turned into just black and white.

When Diana saw that man who appeared as if welling up from the ground between Balor=Shii’s face and herself, Diana’s expression twisted with anger and she once again took a stance with Pomona.

“Hey! Spare me that. Your twin swords were of no concern to me, but getting hit by Pomona would hurt.”

He was wearing a soot-stained shirt, trousers with suspenders, and a black newsboy cap.

Also, he was holding a lantern.

“William Bareig.....!”

Diana called the name of the person who was like an embodiment of death,

with his left eye glowing in an ominous red color behind the flames of the Shii.

“What is your objective!? First you attack Yasuo and Nodoka, and then you plant a Shii inside Shouko... Is this uproar at Galedeite your doing as well!?”

“Hmm. You may not believe me, but I will state for the record that I am not to blame for this current incident or the case with Shouko Tatewaki. The culprit you’re looking for is Beatrice Heller. The same person who bewitched Khaliya Welleger.”

“.....Beatrice Heller....”

Diana shuddered on feeling the malice of that person whom she had not even seen yet.

“They were probably among the ones that attacked Galedeite this time, the Shii that were once Magitech Knights of Resteria, wielding that Techo Weapon called Sinistra... hey!?”

Dian shot an arrow of light from Pomona without any warning.

William avoided that in a hurry, and patted his chest with exaggerated motions.

“Stop doing such scary things. Didn’t I just say that it would hurt if I got hit with that?”

“If killing you right here would help maintain the peace of the world, I would do that without hesitation!”

“Despite that pretty face, you speak just like any other soldier. Well, that’s how you should be. Descendent of Krone and Radagast. So you can use Pomona to such an extent even though you only received it recently. Don’t you think that you people don’t particularly need any help from the Kenzaki family?”

“.....We should have done that from the beginning. But it is too late now. And besides... whether we reached out to the Kenzaki family or not, I am sure that you would have done something to hurt them eventually.”

“Hmm, well I can’t deny that... Oi!”

William let out an exaggerated shout at the arrow of light that almost grazed his face as it flew by, and then looked at Diana.

“.....I won’t miss next time. Tell me what you know about the Shii and what your objective is.”

“It will only cause me some pain if you hit me with that, so if you want to do that then feel free... but sure. Since you seem to want to know so badly, I’ll tell you just one thing. It is regarding Shouko Tatewaki.”

“.....?”

“I am also a 『Latch』.”

“Eh?”

“However, capturing me is beyond Beatrice Heller’s abilities. That is why she is searching for a 『Latch』 other than me. I don’t particularly care either way, but looking at it from your perspective of right and wrong, allowing her to capture a 『Latch』 would probably not be a good thing for all of you.”

“What exactly is a 『Latch』!? If you’re saying that you are one of them, then are you actually a human being!?”

“Saying it that way is a little mean, but no, you’re wrong. However, that woman is slightly mistaken. A 『Latch』 does not necessarily need to be a living human being. The only thing that matters is that they have a 『visible eye』.”

Saying that, William gestured towards his own left eye with the hand that was holding the lantern.

“From what I can see, Shouko Tatewaki was really just an average Japanese person. However, unfortunately for her, she seemed to have an extremely high compatibility with that particular Shii. It was only by coincidence that she became a 『Latch』 candidate. The Shii that possessed her is nothing special either. However, no matter how rare the coincidence was that created it, once that woman is aware of the existence of a 『Latch』, she won’t just sit idly by and let it escape from her grasp. You should be very careful. If she releases a powerful Shii like this Balor in Japan, that will truly become a situation too gruesome to look at.”

“.....”

Victims were victims, whether they belonged to Ante Lande or Japan.

However, if such a massive Shii were to appear in Japan, or rather, on Earth, what would happen?

It was not enough to just defeat it.

After such an attack, the nature of the world itself would definitely change.

That peaceful town and country that Yasuo and Shouko lived in would change.

“.....I definitely won’t let such a thing happen!”

“There’s no point in telling me that. Well, I don’t particularly care who dies and where they die, but I don’t like the idea of letting Beatrice do as she likes. Besides, I would eventually like for the Kenzaki family to help me out, so I’ll take my leave for now. I feel like I will really be killed if I overstay my visit.”

“Wait! You still haven’t told me what your objective is...!”

“What good will it do for you to hear the objective of someone like me? Now that you have Pomona, I certainly have more interest in making you one of my comrades compared to the last time we met, but there’s no way you’ll agree to that, right?”

From the tone of William’s voice, it wasn’t apparent whether he was trying to taunt her or soothe her, but Diana frowned at the discomfort that she felt upon hearing the words that he had just uttered.

“Comrade? Did you just say comrade?”

“If possible, I would also like to make Yasuo Kenzaki and Nodoka Kenzaki my comrades as well. Yasuo is amazing, you know? Sure, he’s next to useless when it comes to battle, but he used the broadcasting facilities to single-handedly purify all the Shii that appeared inside Galedeite. If only he was at least able to fight at the level of an ordinary Magitech Knight, he would have no demerits.”

William said that with a wry smile while slumping his shoulders, and then adjusted the newsboy cap on his head and looked up at the pitch black sky.

“Oh, it looks like I’ve stayed here a little too long. Now it’s time for me to go back for real. Please send my regards to Yasuo and Erijina Radagast.”

Diana’s reply was in the form of an arrow of light.

“Seriously, despite that pretty face, you are one scary young lady.”

William took that arrow head on without bothering to avoid it.

Just as the arrows of light had broken Balor=Shii’s body into pieces, it also broke William’s body into particles of soot.

Or rather, it only appeared that way.

Diana put up her guard.

The soot spun around like a tornado, writhed in that monochrome space like giant snake, and rushed straight at Diana.

“...!! Take this!!”

Diana continuously fired arrows of light at it, but there was no feedback at all and it felt like she was shooting at mist.

“Ah...!!”

And then, the first few particles of soot touched Diana.

“Ugh... Ahhhhhh!”

It was cold, and yet hot.

It felt like each particle of soot transmitted every possible unpleasant sensation to her body as they passed by her.

Unable to bear that pressure, Diana could not remain standing and she sank down to the ground in an unsightly manner.

『Wielder of Pomona... should you wish to know the location of the Hero Hideo, you would do well to search at the boundary of life.』

Diana listened to the sound created by the unpleasant soot as it flew past her body.

『The Holy Bow Pomona, Holy Staff Marlowe, and Holy Sword Liutberga... the Holy Armaments belonging to the Heroes of Salvation are all connected to.....』

“W-What... What are they connected to?”

『The ***』

Diana was not able to understand that sound.

Or rather, her mind refused to comprehend it.

“Guaaaaah!!”

The soot that was wrapping around her body disappeared after an instant that seemed to last for an eternity, and at the same time, the black and white space also crumbled away.

The only thing left behind was the plains that had been ravaged by her battle against Balor=Shii.

“Diana!! Are you okay!?”

“.....Yasuo.”

When someone called her from behind her all of a sudden, Diana dazedly turned around while still sitting on the ground.

Yasuo was standing there, along with the Magitech Knight from the Gaz Commonwealth, and he was looking at Diana with concern in his eyes.

“Was William here just now?”

“You were able to see him?”

“Not really. It was the same kind of black space that appeared in Tokorozawa and I wasn’t able to see you anywhere, so I thought that he might be behind it... Did he do something to you?”

Yasuo asked Diana that when he saw that she was acting strangely, but Diana just shook her head and forced herself to stand on her legs that still had some of that unpleasant sensation remaining.

“I’m fine... We talked for quite a while, but he didn’t injure me in any way. It seems... that he has already left.”

“I-I see...”

Diana looked around to make sure that there were no remnants of the soot in her surroundings, and then she suddenly realized something.

“I don’t see Balor’s... the massive body of that Shii anywhere, did you send it off, Yasuo?”

“No, I tried, but it had absolutely no effect. I was also more worried about you

and William's barrier, so I didn't have the time to think about that....."

"It was swallowed up by the ground and disappeared in front of our eyes, just like a regular Shii. If that Shii was based on Balor who went on a rampage during the war against Demon King Kaul, I feel a chill run down my spine when I think that we will have to fight against it again someday."

"I... see..."

After the Magitech Knight from the Gaz Commonwealth who was standing next to Yasuo said that, Diana hung her head a little.

"A-Anyway, that was incredible. You overwhelmed something so big.... Well, this is the first time I've seen you fighting on this world, Diana, is it that you find it easier to fight when you're here?"

Perhaps Yasuo noticed Diana's reaction, as he put on a forced cheery voice and said that.

Diana smiled while still looking down and shook her head.

"No. A lot of things happened. A lot of different things.... In the short period of the past two days..... This Holy Bow Pomona, the Holy Armament belonging to my mother, is something that I was allowed to borrow for just this one time. My mother cannot easily come to Gaz because of her position, so... However..."

Diana raised her head and looked directly at Yasuo.

"When we received a message from Catalina Yostern-sama that she had taken in someone who might have been you, Yasuo, I wasn't able to sit still. The Gaz Commonwealth is a country where the influence of the Carnelian of the Coal Mine is especially strong. When I thought that something might happen to you or Shouko.... I....."

Yasuo panicked when he saw that Diana's eyes were filled with tears.

"Ah, no, we went through a lot of stuff as well. We might have caused you to worry, but thanks to that Catalina-san both Tatewaki-san and I are perfectly fine, I am still alive thanks to Feig Reid-san, and remember how Dad started shining in the Gate Tower when we were on our way here? That was what caused all the problems, right? It's definitely not your fault or Resteria's fault,

so...”

Yasuo’s vehement argument was cut short by golden hair and a flower-shaped hair ornament that filled his vision.

“Thank goodness... It’s really you, isn’t it, Yasuo.... You’re alright.... Thank goodness....”

“Uwaah!?”

“.....Oh my.”

When Diana rushed straight at him from the front, Yasuo, who had run out of both mana and stamina, was knocked backwards onto the ground.

Since the ground was covered with soft grass, Feigreid did not attempt to help him, and Diana burst into tears while lying on top of him.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry for being late! I... I....!”

“D-Diana! I can’t breathe....”

“I was so worried. I was so scared! I was so scared that something might have happened to you because of me....!”

“L-Like I said, it wasn’t your fault. It was Dad’s fault, right!? Seriously, I’m begging you, please move away, this is embarrassing...”

“Yasuoooooooo..... Ueeeeeeeh!”

“Should I give you two some privacy?”

“F-Feig-san, that would just make it even more embarrassing instead....”

Yasuo was hesitant to hold Diana, even if it was just move her aside. Comforting a girl who was crying because she was worried about him was a feat that was impossible for him, and just when he stretched out his hand with the intention of asking for help from Feig who was attempting to leave while smiling, he saw it.

A strangely round creature was descending from the sky while flapping its wings.

Without a doubt, that was the scaled dragon that Catalina had tamed.

Why did the scaled dragon have to come this way?

There was only one answer.

“D-Diana! Please, calm down! I’m safe! Although if you keep this up, I won’t be safe anymore....”

However Yasuo’s entreaty was in vain, and the scaled dragon touched down on the ground with unexpected grace.

And then, after a few seconds.

“.....What are... the two of you doing.....?”

Yasuo’s eyes met Shouko’s cold gaze that was apparent even through the flames of the Shii.

“I guess... This is it for me.”

Along with his lack of mana, Yasuo felt that his strength was also being drained away.

Translation Notes:

[1] [Five O’Clock Chime](#) ↑



Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Epilogue

Interlude – 4

“Aah... I wonder if that bastard will really come back in one week...”

“Nodoka... You seem to be very upset....”

“When I think that I’m working hard at school and cram school, and Onii-chan is enjoying a carefree vacation in that paradise-like other world with a pretty girl on each side, and moreover, he’s using someone else’s money to do it, I can’t stop my resentment from building up.”

“A pretty girl on each side... Yeah, I won’t deny that, but I don’t think Yasuo is capable of doing anything to them, and I don’t think he’s having such a carefree time either.”

“I know that, but just think about it normally.”

“Hmm?”

“They went to meet Shouko-san’s parents before they left, right? And of course, in the other world, they will be meeting Diana-san’s mother as well, right?”

“That should be the case.”

“Isn’t that basically like a parent-approved relationship? It is definitely a parent-approved relationship, isn’t it!? Despite the fact that he’s useless. Even though he’s useless!!”

“Parent-approved? What are they approving? And why did you say it twice?”

“Diana-san and Shouko-san share a big secret with Onii-chan, so they’re like the only three people in the world who have that in common, right?”

“Myself, you, Madoka, and Hideo. Then there’s Her Excellency Erijina, and the

Tatewaki couple as well. Altogether, there are ten people.”

“Thinking about it normally, wouldn’t he raise a flag with either one of them!? Diana-san is sickeningly sweet to Onii-chan to begin with, and Shouko-san seems strangely accepting of Onii-chan as well.”

“Ah..... Well.....”

“And it’s Onii-chan we’re talking about, so he’s just going to break all those flags into pieces and come back like nothing happened, right? Aargh, I’m so irritated! If I knew this was going to happen, I should have volunteered to become the Hero instead!”

“Well... Yasuo.... It looks like you’re going to have a rough time after you return.”

Epilogue

It took half a day for Shouko’s mood to improve.

It was not really a big enough deal for her to misunderstand what had happened, but since she had come looking for Yasuo because she was worried about him, only to find him lying on the ground hugging Diana (or so it appeared), her anger was probably inevitable considering her position.

Even after they confirmed that there were no more Shii inside the town of Galedeite, they were kept busy and most of their day was taken up with things such as trying to understand the total scope of the damage, Diana’s discussions with Galedeite’s Knights Division about her crossing the border as an emergency special envoy, and confirming the safety of the people associated with the House of the Fireflies.

In the end, all the people who had been present at the location where Balor=Shii’s body had disappeared were only able to meet again late that night.

“Umm... I’m really sorry. I let my emotions get the better of me when I saw that Yasuo was safe, and I really had no other ulterior motives....”

“It’s fine, already!! If you apologize any more, I’ll be the one who gets embarrassed!!”

They rented rooms at an inn that was located in a section of the town with relatively less damage, and Yasuo, Shouko, Diana, Catalina, and Feigreid were all assembled there, but Diana had been continuously apologizing since the start and on the other hand, Shouko found herself being steadily driven into a corner by Catalina's smirking expression.

"I'm so jealous of Yasuo. I wish that I can follow in his footsteps as well."

"Feig-san, stop saying things like that with a refreshing smile!!"

It was an honest opinion that came from his steadfast personality, but just made it even worse.

"Anyway!! Like we explained, after Yasu-kun and I fell out of the Gate Tower, we were rescued by Catalina-san and ended up here! What about you, Diana-san!? Just what happened to you after that!?"

"I-I was the only one who drifted to the exit of the Gate Tower in Resteria as per the usual process. Yasuo, Hideo, and Shouko were not with me, so everyone who had assembled there, including my mother, fell into chaos."

She explained that it wasn't just Yasuo and Shouko, even Hideo had been ejected from the Gate Tower.

There were many conceivable reasons for that, but apparently they discovered the location of his father a few dozen minutes after Diana reached Resteria.

"My mother used Pomona to determine Hideo's approximate location. Pomona, Liutberga, and Madoka's Marlowe rule over all of creation in Ante Lande, and they are sacred treasures that act in concert with each other... However, there was a problem."

Yasuo had already heard about this right after he managed to escape from Diana's embrace and Shouko's cold glare, but apparently his father had not yet made contact with Diana or Erijina.

"He is at a place that he cannot easily move from. Compared to Yasuo, if word of Hideo's existence got out, it is capable of doing far more damage, so unless it is someone like Second Lieutenant Feigreid who is a special case, he cannot carelessly ask people for help even within the country."

“Honestly speaking, I am still very much a novice, so I am a little tense. More importantly, when I think that I am witnessing a legendary moment with my own eyes, my heart cannot help but leap with joy.”

Feigreid was older than Diana, but perhaps because he was keeping the difference in their social status or the difference in their fighting strengths in mind, from the moment he met her, he had been looking up at Diana with sparkling eyes as though he was her subordinate.

“I swear upon the name of the Great Sorceress Erijina that I will never carelessly reveal your secrets!”

“A-Ah... Yes, I am counting on you.....”

Diana felt like backing away from Feigreid who was speaking in a straightforward manner and giving off a strange sense of pressure.

“However, despite having heard the circumstances, my feelings are complicated. If not for the Carnelian of the Coal Mine, I might have lost my life when I was still a child... So I find it hard to believe that the Foreman of that organization is involved with the Shii that are threatening the whole world.”

“However, that is the truth. It is possible that even Balor=Shii that appeared this time was dispatched here on the basis of information sent by Director Kelly of the House of the Fireflies. We were almost certain that Beatrice Heller had the ability to selectively choose and lead the Shii that are based on Magitech Knights from Resteria, but the incident this time is even more serious. We cannot continue to ignore her.”

The Demon General Balor is famous throughout the world, along with the legend of the Hideo Holy Sword River.

It was impossible to ensure that every single person who was in Galedeite kept their mouths shut.

Sooner or later, word would get out that a demon Shii had appeared, and the world would be surrounded by an even more gloomy atmosphere.

“Well, we can worry about that later, but for now, why wasn’t Dad able to meet up with you?”

“About that... It appears that Hideo landed in territory controlled by Baskelgarde.”

“He’s in Baskelgarde?”

“Yes. What’s more, he seems to be in a region that is quite deep within the country, so if he tries to fly or use his abilities in any way, Baskelgarde will detect it and find out about his existence, so he’s basically stuck there... Also, the reason why you were not able to summon Hideo like you did in Japan is also probably connected to that.”

“Does you mean that is the place where the Holy Sword Liutberga originated?”

Diana nodded in reply to Catalina’s question.

“In the first place, Hideo’s Holy Sword Liutberga was first discovered in the Baskelgarde Federation, in a temple constructed by an ancient civilization that is located in the mountain ranges at the far north. Hideo’s landing point is also estimated to be somewhere around there. It is hard to imagine that this was just a coincidence...”

“.....I see. Were Pomona and Marlowe also discovered in the same place?”

“No, each of them were found in different places, enshrined in temples built by an ancient civilization...”

The phrase ‘ancient civilization’ brings to mind a sense of persistent history and romance.

However, when Yasuo remembered the 『perfected form』 of his mother’s Holy Staff Marlowe, he didn’t really feel like accepting any sense of romance from the kind of ancient civilization that forces the user of the staff to fight in that sort of a Magical Lady form.

“While we had at least confirmed that Hideo was safe, we had absolutely no idea where Yasuo and Shouko ended up, so all of us fell into a panic. If something had happened to the two of you, we would not be able to face the Tatewaki family as well as Madoka and Nodoka, and more than anything, I was so worried about the two of you that I just couldn’t sit still....”

“So once you found out that Yasuo was safe, your feelings of relief and anxiety came to the fore all at once and you ended up hugging him, is that it?”

“.....Yes.... I’m sorry....”

“Catalina-san!!”

The evil old lady Catalina obviously found the situation to be highly amusing, causing Diana to shrink down even further and Shouko to yell at her with a red face, while on the other hand, Yasuo just elected to just stay silent.

“H-However, I was really surprised when my mother received the Magitech transmission from Catalina-sama. I had heard that she was living in Gaz, but I had no idea that she possessed a Magitech device capable of sending messages from so far away.....”

“Well, I suppose you would have no way of knowing that. Ever since I happened to meet Hideo and Erize during my travels thirty years ago, I have stayed in contact with Erize and we periodically exchange messages. Even though one of my paintings was selected as a national treasure, that fame alone is not enough to keep me fed for the rest of my life... And Erize appreciated my achievement of having continued to travel on my own for a long time... so she gave me various tasks from time to time.”

“Wait, does that mean....”

Hearing Feigreid ask that in an uneasy voice, Catalina shook her head.

“You may not believe me, but my work was confined to the interior of Resteria. I was born in Torjesso, but I grew up in Gaz, and I am happy that I was allowed to settle here permanently. I give you my word, I never sent Erize any sensitive information about Gaz. And besides, Erize probably has several talented people who could do the job better than someone like me who stands out a lot. On the other hand, there were things I could do to support Erize specifically because I stand out. In any case...”

Catalina looked at Yasuo and Shouko in turn.

“I’m sure the two of you were desperate, but I knew from the start that the two of you were lying to me and hiding something.”

“.....I suppose we made fools of ourselves in front of a professional.”

“It’s like I said. Even if people suspect you, it is fine as long as you don’t let them find out any crucial information. That wariness of yours was commendable considering that the two of you were amateurs.”

After saying that in a consoling tone, Catalina turned to Diana and Feig Reid.

“Honestly, it was only recently that I was asked to look into the activities of the Carnelian of the Coal Mine in Resteria. Considering that I am from Torjesso, it was a trivial task for me. I looked into several organizations that were affiliated to Carnelian, including Kelly’s House of the Fireflies, but as far as I could see, they were all still just charitable institutions. However, there was definitely something strange about them.”

The tip of the iceberg was probably that 『message from the Foreman』 that Director Kelly had received.

“I have no idea what that person called William Bareig that Diana-chan mentioned was talking about, but it seems to me that leaving this situation unchecked will lead to nothing but trouble. Whether it is for Resteria, Japan, or even the Gaz Commonwealth. What do you and Erize plan on doing from here on out?”

“Honestly speaking, we have not yet been able to come to any decision. Although Yasuo and Shouko are safe for now, when I think about Balor, I don’t think the two of them will be safe even if we send just the two of them back to Japan....”

“If the overall plan has yet to be decided, the only thing you can do is to take care of whatever is under your nose, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is no way to find out anything regarding that person called William, correct? And from what you told me, Diana-chan, it doesn’t feel like he is going to proactively take any action anytime soon. In that case, there are only three things that all of you should take care of.”

Yasuo couldn’t tell if that number of tasks was large or small, but as he looked confused, Catalina continued to speak while counting them out on her fingers.

“Regrouping with Hideo. Understanding the connection between Shouko and the Shii inside her. Eliminating Beatrice Heller. I think it should be alright if you work on these three tasks based on their priority and degree of difficulty.”

“Catalina-san, did you just say ‘Elimination’.....?”

“I am saying that based on the information we have right now, Beatrice Heller is a threat to all the people living in the world. Just the fact that she controls the Shii makes her someone who will not have a good effect on society, and it is also a fact that there has already been a large number of casualties. No matter how it is done, there is no choice but to eliminate her. However...”

“We currently have no definite proof or any means by which to corner her.”

Catalina nodded to what Feigreid said.

“That’s right. As for the disturbance this time as well, the only explanation we have is from that person called William Bareig, and of all the people here, only Yasuo and Diana-chan have met him. We have no objective evidence at all. If we make a move on Beatrice Heller right now, it will be considered as terrorism or assassination, and it will leave behind a lot of uneasiness in society. So we cannot eliminate Beatrice Heller right away. In which case...”

Catalina looked around at everyone present.

“The only thing you can do is to go to Baskelgarde. For the sake of both Hideo and Shouko.”

“Wait, for my sake?”

Shouko blinked when her name suddenly came up along with one of the countries of Ante Lande.

“That’s right. I am fairly certain that the Shii inside you was originally someone from Baskelgarde.”

“How could you know about something like that!?”

When Diana asked that vehemently, Catalina pointed to her own wrist.

“You may not have seen it, Diana-chan, but the things Shouko did were quite amazing. She fought barehanded against a Shii that wielded a sword, and still came out on top, after all.”

“Eh!?”

Diana looked at Shouko with a shocked expression, and Shouko did not deny it either.

“Yeah.... Well, it started ever since I came to this world. For whatever reason, when I got into trouble, the power of the Shii would activate to protect me. It’s like, this flame that is currently only in my left eye starts gushing out of my right eye as well, and also, rings of flames appear around my wrists, waist and ankles, and my whole body starts to feel charged with energy....”

“Wrists, ankles, and your waist...?”

“Wait, could that be...?”

Both Diana and Feigreid reacted at the same time after hearing Shouko’s explanation.

““Baskelgarde’s 『Destroyer of Armies』, Orion!?””

“That’s right.”

“Please explain it in a way that Tatewaki-san and I can understand as well.”

Catalina nodded as if she was satisfied, and Yasuo asked for an explanation.

“I can’t tell for sure until I actually see it, but if what Shouko said is true, then the shape that her flames took is similar to that of Orion, known as the 『Destroyer of Armies』, which is one the oldest Techno Weapons developed by the Baskelgarde Federation.”

Diana said that, and Feigreid also agreed with her.

“I saw it as well. It is an old Techno Weapon, so it is apparently not used in the field anymore, but everyone knows that it is the weapon that laid the foundations for Techno Weapons research in Baskelgarde. I have heard that unlike the modern Techno Weapons that convert the wielder’s mana into things like a beam of light, it is apparently used to increase the wielder’s physical strength and agility.”

“Ah, so that’s why...”

That not only explained why Shouko was able to do things like kick a beast

high into the air and cause a Shii to get embedded in a wall ever since she got here, but it also explained why the Shii that they had encountered in Tokorozawa when Khalija first came to Japan had a level of strength and agility that was a higher than that of all the other Shii they had faced.

“If you is able to master the use of the Holy Armament Pomona, Diana-chan, then you should be able to get in touch with Hideo. Also, Yasuo and Shouko cannot return to Japan right away. The Techno Weapon that the Shii that is inside Shouko takes the form of still exists in Baskelgarde. Also, we cannot let Baskelgarde know that Hideo was summoned to this world, so it is not possible to get any reinforcements from Resteria.... I think that basically decides the issue, right?”

“.....Yasuo, Shouko.....”

Diana looked towards the two of them as if she was taking over from Catalina.

“.....I will make sure to protect the two of you this time... So would you please....”

Diana stopped talking because both Yasuo and Shouko held up their hands.

“That’s enough, you don’t need to say any more.”

“There is absolutely no reason for you to think that you were in the wrong, Diana-san.”

“Yasuo.... Shouko?”

“I mean, we are talking about my father, after all.”

“And it involves me as well.”

Yasuo and Shouko said it like it was only natural.

“Let’s go together. To Baskelgarde. I realized that I don’t just want to be protected all the time, and if anything, I was the one who kept protecting Yasu-kun this time... although I’m not sure how well I’ll do if I am fighting against people.”

“After what happened this time, I understood more clearly than ever that I am of no use when it comes to fighting. On the other hand, I also learned that I can heal even fairly serious wounds as long as they are not immediately fatal. I

think that I will be more useful than I was in the past, both before and after a fight. I won't do anything like making you fight alone even after getting a fracture, Diana."

"Yasuo.... Shouko....!"

"If you don't mind, I would like to accompany you as well. I may not be as powerful as Major Krone, but I still have confidence in my skills. I will not lose to a regular shii or Magitech Knight!"

"Second Lieutenant Feigreid... Is that really okay? What about your duties here in Galedeite?"

Feigreid spoke as if to display his skill with the sword that hung from his waist, and Diana asked him that in return even though she was still teary-eyed.

"As a Magitech Knight of Ante Lande, I do not have the choice of not going along with you in such a situation. You understand, don't you, Major Krone?"

".....You're right. I'm sure I would have done the same thing in your place."

All the soldiers who were born in the generation after the war against Demon King Kaul and who fought at the forefront of their Knights Divisions yearned to experience the same kind of adventures as Hideo did, while keeping their pride as soldiers.

Just like Diana, Feigreid was also a young man who admired the Hero.

"And besides, I am indebted to the Carnelian of the Coal Mine. If my mother and the organization she believed in are doing the wrong things, then I have a duty to correct them. I wish to fight, for the sake of the children who live in this town as well."

"It looks like everyone is in agreement."

Catalina nodded as if she was satisfied, and handed Yasuo a silver-colored pipe that she pulled out of her robe.

"I can't go along with you as I would only get in your way, but take my scaled dragon with you. Keeping it fed is a bit of a hassle, but it can easily fly while carrying four people, so I'm sure it will come in useful even after you enter Baskelgarde."

“.....Thank you very much!”

It was certain that their travel would become a lot easier if they used the scaled dragon that could fly without using magic.

A lot of things had happened in the two days since they came to Ante Lande.

However, it looked like that was still just the tip of iceberg.

“I wonder if we will really be able to to back in one week.”

“When the two of us ended up in that forest, Yasu-kun, I already gave up on returning within the prearranged time limit.”

“I made a promise to your parents, so I will definitely send you back to Japan within the time limit, Shouko!”

“I will make sure to properly protect all of you during the journey! Please be at ease!”

Catalina gave a small smile after seeing the young people who were exhilarated about their adventure that would begin tomorrow, and spoke in a low voice to herself.

“I wonder if all of you traveled in this way as well... Hideo....”

The artist burned the enthusiasm of those young people into her memory, as if overlapping them with the Heroes of Salvation from thirty years ago.



Yuusha no Segare – Volume 3 Afterword

Afterword

As a person who got through elementary and middle school with the school-provided lunch, the words 『school cafeteria』 and 『school store』 simultaneously evoked both feelings of yearning and awe in me.

I imagined all sorts of useless things about what I would do after entering high school, such as scrambling to get bread at the school store, or asking for a larger serving at the school cafeteria while being scolded by the old lady in charge.

However, once I actually entered high school, what I saw before me was truly anticlimactic.

A meal-ticket based system that left no room for argument about the selection or quantity of food.

All the popular items on the menu would be sold out because of the students who came early to school for club practice.

There was no separate school store, and the place that sold bread was treated as part of the school cafeteria, so all the students satisfied their need for bread by solemnly standing in well-ordered lines at the downtown McDona**s.

And more than anything, what left me crestfallen was the fact that everything was quite expensive.

It was certainly less expensive than wandering into some restaurant in the town to eat, but paying 480 Yen for *shoyu ramen* or 400 Yen for curry every day was simply too high a threshold for a highschool student who did not have a part-time job.

As for bread, the *yakisoba sandwich* that often appears in stories set in high schools was actually priced over 200 Yen. What's more, they were so small that you would need at least three of them to fill your stomach.

No matter how you looked at it, it was not a price that would prompt students from all over the school to compete fiercely for their share.

Of course, there was no way that my mother would allow me to spend nearly 500 Yen everyday to eat things like curry and ramen, so I was fortunate enough to receive a bento from her almost everyday for three years that was far more filling and had more variety than any single item from the school cafeteria.

It has been a while. This is Wagahara, whose biggest regret is not being able to eat the *katsu curry* that was the most popular item on the school menu.

In the end, the first time Wagahara was able to decide what to eat on his own was after entering college.

As for being able to properly cook on my own, it was only after the late age of twenty five.

I think that deciding what to eat on your own is an essential step to becoming an independent adult.

In order to make decisions on what, when, where, and how to eat something, it is necessary to have a suitable level of economic freedom, ability to take action, ability to discern the quality of food, and the ability to act without the oversight of guardians.

On the other hand, it is probably only after one gains all these requisite abilities and becomes an adult who does not rely on anyone for their food, that they start to realize how lucky they were to experience a time when they could completely depend on someone else for their bountiful meals, the so-called 『mother's cooking』.

By the way, I am sure that most adults have some fond memories of their 『mother's cooking』, but the phrase 『father's cooking』 doesn't pop up very often.

However, these days, it has become quite normal for fathers to participate in taking care of children as well.

Maybe once the children from this generation grow up, they will feel nostalgic while saying things like 『My father made this particular dish for me when I was a child』.

By the way, my experience of an unforgettable 『father's cooking』 is the roasted pacific saury that my father would quietly leave next to my keyboard as I sat in front of my PC while drinking coffee.

Around two-thirty in the afternoon. Coffee and pacific saury would be waiting on the PC desk.

My father was always a little crazy when it came to fish, but I still have no idea why he would choose that sort of time to roast pacific saury.

This book is about the children who are still not able to choose the contents of their own meals, but who are growing without realizing it into people who will be able to make those choices someday.

Unlike a certain Demon King and his friends, they are still incapable of securing their own meals unless they are under someone's protection, but it would be nice if we could see them grow just a little closer to adulthood in the next volume as well.

Well then, let us meet again in the next volume!!



– Wagahara Satoshi.

『Wagahara’s friend watching in shock as he sticks his head into a box』

Friend: What on earth are you doing?

Wagahara: Pacific saury in a box.

Friend: You’ve been strange since a while back, what happened?

Wagahara: Perhaps I have lost confidence in myself.

Friend: Should I pack some in a box and ship it to you?



Illustrations: 029 (oniku)

I have become addicted to ramen lately. I want to eat some tasty *shoyu ramen* made with chicken stock....

